



The
CONCENTRATIONS
of
BEE

Lilian Bell

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BY
Lilian Bell

Author of
"ABROAD WITH THE JIMMIES"
"AT HOME WITH THE JARDINES"
"HOPE LORING"
ETC.

Frontispiece by A.P. Button

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

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*Electrotyped and Printed by
THE COLONIAL PRESS
C. H. Simonds & Co., Boston, U.S.A.*

TO

Kleine Mayo

WHO IS MORE BELOVED BY HER FRIENDS THAN SHE
CAN BE MADE TO BELIEVE, AND TO WHOM THIS
LITTLE VOLUME IS DEDICATED BECAUSE
I LOVE THE FRAGRANCE OF HER
UNSELFISH DAILY LIFE

The Concentrations of Bee

SCENE. Bohemia with occasional excursions into
High Life
TIME. The present

Persons in the Book

BEATRICE LATHROP, a young widow

FAITH JARDINE, her sister, who tells of the
"Concentrations of Bee" — and other things

AUBREY JARDINE, Faith's husband, an "Angel"
— in her estimation, also a playwright

MR. JIMMIE, a broker of good heart, with much
money but not much manners. Faith's firm ally

MRS. JIMMIE, another "Angel"

LAFLIN VAN TASSEL, a young millionaire archi-
tect "handsome as Apollo" — a pleasing com-
bination

BOB MYGATT, a graceless scamp "with Irish blue
eyes." He is also a writer of comic operas

EDWARD MUNSON, Bob's cousin, an artist

ELEANOR MUNSON, his wife, a portrait painter

AVA CORLISS, "a nice girl" with a mission, en-
gaged to Bob

"OUR DEAR LYDDY," a rich old maid, Bee's
sister-in-law, and also engaged to Bob

AMY LEVERING, another "nice girl" with a
different mission

LAURA CLYDE, another girl, not so "nice"

HOPE LORING, a heroine

"DUSTY" MILLER, a West Point cadet

And several other characters of less import-
ance, mostly Bohemians

Preface

To those gentle critics and versatile friends who persist in finding prototypes in real life for my characters in fiction, I am compelled to issue a statement of facts.

In spite of complimentary inquiries as to who furnished me with the originals of each of my dear Jimmies, I must say with Mrs. Gummidge: "I don't believe there is no such a person." If I did, how I would cultivate them both!

In like manner, although I possess a sister, she is not the Bee of this story, nor, alas, is there any James or Lyddy or Bob Mygatt or Laflin Van Tassel, or in fact anybody!

Nothing in this story is real — tears choke me as I say it! — except possibly the automobile!

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The Concentrations of Bee

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM OF LIVING

“**I**F our Bee,” said Jimmie to me one day when we were travelling from Vienna to Buda-Pesth, “ever concentrates on a thing, that thing is a goner. If she ever concentrates on a woman, that woman is a goner. And if she ever concentrates her peculiar mental energies on a man —” Jimmie flung up his hands — “God help him!”

I have never mentioned these remarks before, although they come back to me, under the present conditions, with the conviction that Jimmie is not nearly the fool I sometimes think him, and also because I was not then ready to devote myself to a description of Bee’s deadly work, but now I am. For another thing, Jimmie said this just after Bee’s flirtations with the Austrian officers for missionary purposes and to spread the gospel of the American woman among the heathen of

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foreign lands, so I simply thought he was referring to Bee's admirable target practice in bringing down her victim without half trying. Yet I remember even then wishing vaguely that Bee would concentrate on her husband, our beloved James, who, to speak moderately, was the most exquisitely disagreeable person any of us had ever met, and whose chief delight was to see those around him made wretched by some word or deed of his own coining. Also, while she was about it, I thought it would do no harm for her to concentrate on Lyddy Lathrop, her sister-in-law, our beloved James's acidulous sister. But I said nothing at the time for the reason that we strove to bear our burdens in a silence, which if not dignified, was at least stoical. Also for the reason that the public always betrays a maudlin sympathy with anyone whom we, of the Happy Family take the trouble to dislike, because we are so unnaturally fierce in our fluent denunciations of our victims, yet never bother much to explain what they have done to incur our royal displeasure.

However, things have changed. Family matters have developed and become so public that everybody knows why we ignored the Lathrops all we could and people now begin to see a reason.

In the first place James has had the good taste to die—the only considerate thing I ever remember his doing, and knowing how much pleasure this one act would confer on all his relatives, he deferred it as long as possible. However he did die after all, but we never dreamed how mean he was going to be about it until after his will was read. Then, nobody ever said to any of us again, "My dear, how *can* you say such things?" because they were occupied in saying things about him just as bad, or worse.

There's a good deal in having public sympathy with you, even if it is unintelligent. It saves many tiresome explanations.

James died just a few weeks after the Angel and I went abroad, so I had not seen my sister since her liberation, nor did we obtain any clear idea of how the property was left until we came home, for Bee likes to have her surprises complete and dramatic.

In one way or another the Jimmies had also been prevented from seeing her, so that we were all on the qui vive, which, knowing Bee, must have suited her exactly.

I knew that by the fact that she allowed herself to be called out of town the day before we landed, leaving only a letter to greet our return.

As for us we had just come home from a year in Europe, where the Angel had been seeking local colour for a new play. We didn't really go because we wanted local colour. We went because Peach Orchard bored the life out of us after the new wore off. Country life is really more to be admired than enjoyed, especially by such as the Angel and I, who are unhappy unless we can see the lights of Broadway by going on the roof.

We were, of course, stony broke. I hate people who come home from Europe with money. It shows that they don't know how to enjoy themselves.

But being impecunious did not worry us at first. We knew that all we had to do was to show the new play to any one of the eager managers, who ought to have been at the pier to meet us and so secure a first chance at the "masterpiece."

So we went to an hotel where we had sufficient credit not to be invited to pay a month's rent in advance and the Angel jauntily submitted his play to the manager who had made a neat little fortune out of our first play and who almost lost the shoes off his feet on the second. He returned it after some delay indicating the changes to be made. Indignantly

the Angel took it to a second manager and then to a third.

Finally in the fourth week of our credit at the hotel, the Angel decided to make the changes insisted upon by our first manager. But alas this would take at least a month! In the meantime where was the money to live on, coming from?

We decided that we must go to housekeeping. The tenants of Peach Orchard were hard up and paid their rent whenever they could. We tried them, but it was like tapping a vacuum. We couldn't turn them out because they owed us too much money. Besides we didn't want to stay in the country in the winter anyway.

We looked everywhere for an apartment but the Subway had raised rents appallingly. It was now the twenty-ninth day of our credit. I suggested borrowing money. The Angel shook his head.

"If we borrow of our personal friends, we should lose them. You can't stay friendly with people you have borrowed money from."

"It would be a nice comfortable way to end certain friendships," I observed thoughtfully. "Now there's Elkinson. Borrow a hundred of him and then we won't have to know him."

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"But I thought you liked his wife," objected the Angel.

"That's so, I do. Men who are good for nothing but to borrow money from, always have wives too nice to be sacrificed."

We ran over a list of our friends, and put prices on our estimate of them, but finally gave up the idea. There was always the fear that they might refuse and then we should hate them so we'd have to give them up anyway.

"I heard to-day that there was a new artist studio building just finished that Munson and Fanshaw and McElroy and several others had clubbed together and built. Suppose you go and see what's to do," said the Angel.

Now Munson and his wife, both artists, were jewels in our crown. They were almost as useful to us for literary purposes as the Jimmies, so I rushed around to this building and found it to be the most blissful spot I had ever seen. The top studio was Munson's. Half of his furniture had been moved in and was piled hither and yon with no care for the fine pieces and looking even more topsy-turvy than necessary:

But alas for the Jardines, there was nothing to sublet. It had been a good year for artists and they were all disgustingly paid up, consequently haughty.

As I came down in the elevator, there stood Munson waiting to go up.

He was very tall and thin and wore a frock coat and silk hat that ended somewhere among the rafters.

“Do I smell of mothballs?” he said without preface. We had not met for over a year.

I sniffed delicately.

“No more than most of us do at this season,” I said, breaking it to him as gently as I could.

“I hope it isn’t very bad —” he began anxiously.

“Well, in the open air —”

“That’s just it! It will be in a close room. We are going to lunch at the Waldorf with Frau Polisky of the Grand Opera. In her private suite. My wife is going to paint her. It’s a fortunate thing that one of us can make money.”

“What’s the matter?”

“My pictures were skied, and the mural paintings I did for McGinnis’ library are all done, but he went to Egypt for the winter before they were completed and won’t pay for them until he has seen them. Result we are broke, stony broke and shall be for three months.”

“Munson,” I observed feelingly. “There

are but three square meals between us and the poorhouse."

"Is that so!" exclaimed Munson with interest. "Let's go up to the studio and organize ourselves into a Ways and Means Committee."

"Now," he said, politely standing until I had seated myself upon a cracker box. "How is it with you?"

When I had told him, Munson smoked thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said:

"I see no way out of it but for you to sublet this apartment."

"It would be beautiful," I said, "but what would you do? And what are you going to do with all this furniture?"

"Our plans are all made. We shall stay where we are and only come to town to paint. Eleanor has the studio next this. As for the furniture, can't you use some of it? I thought you sold your kitchen utensils and everything that was not worth storing?"

"We did."

"Well, use ours. It will save our having to store them or move them to the country where we don't need them."

"But —" I said.

He waved me to silence.

"Now, as I said, Eleanor has this next studio — "

"But you can't both use that," I interrupted.

"Wait. You and Aubrey take this apartment. I have held it at three thousand dollars. I'll let you have it for twenty-four hundred. Two hundred a month, payable in hundred dollar instalments on the first and fifteenth of every month."

"Nice and easy," I said. "We'll take it."

"Good. Now then, as you are out every morning anyway, I'll sub-sublet this studio room from you until two o'clock every day, for fifty dollars a month. That will let me work all I need to and will give you a drawing room every afternoon and evening and all day Sundays."

I began to laugh.

"Let's pay each other in advance," I said gurgling. "I'll send you a cheque to-night."

"And I you," he answered. A pause. Then he said:

"Excuse me for asking, but will your cheque be good?"

"Certainly not," I replied with spirit.
"Will yours?"

"Alas, I am afraid not."

"But it will be a nice way to exchange autographs," I said. "Girls generally want Aubrey to add a sentiment when they ask for his. Shall he add a sentiment to your cheque?"

"It would do no harm!"

"Then we can paste these cheques on our mirrors until they are negotiable. The mere possession of them will increase our assets."

"You are a business woman," observed Munson with admiration.

"Now, there is but one thing more to do," he said, presently when we had both ruminated upon this pleasant solution of our difficulties, "and that is for one of us to borrow some money."

"It will have to be you, then," I said ruefully. "We have no securities that are not already punched full of pinholes."

"I have never borrowed any money on my stock in this building," observed Munson thoughtfully.

"Then do it this minute," I cried rapturously.

"The only trouble is," he paused to roll a fresh cigarette, "that I have lost the certificate."

"Won't they give you another?"

"Yes, but it will take time and then it would have to be marked 'duplicate' and the bank

might hesitate to accept it. And all that would cause delay, whereas our necessities are immediate."

"Then find the first one! That's the answer to that!"

"I have looked everywhere. I think I shall consult a clairvoyant."

I shrieked with laughter.

"They do help one to find things," he said solemnly.

Then seeing that I continued to rock and roar he said reproachfully:

"If she helps me to find it and I should lend you enough money to make your cheque good, would you stop laughing?"

My teeth came together with a snap which nearly made me owe the dentist also.

"What would you do for ten thousand dollars? I'd hate to tell you," I quoted gravely.

As the clairvoyant lived near, I promised to wait and while Munson was gone I wandered over the apartment and placed the furniture in my mind's eye.

He soon came back with a grin on his face.

"She told me everything — described me and Eleanor and said we were artists, that I had lost a valuable paper that I wanted to borrow money on, described my desk at home

where I thought I had put it, the disorder of it, and said the thing was not lost. She told me where to look for it, 'but,' she said, 'your fellow artists will be much annoyed if you hypothecate your stock. Don't do it. You can get the money in another way. There is a friend of yours, a slim, boyish looking man who knows you own this stock, who will lend you money on your own note.'"

"That describes Aubrey!" I cried in horror.

"Who will lend me money on my note?" cried Munson.

"That's so. I forgot that part of the description," I said. "Well, who can it be?"

"Oh, I know who it is. He has offered to buy my stock."

"Then go to him this minute!" I cried.

"It's too late to-day. I'll go the first thing in the morning. Now I must go and get something to eat. I haven't had any lunch."

"It's three o'clock," I said. "I thought you were to lunch at the Waldorf with your wife and Frau Polisky."

"I forgot all about it," he said simply. "Well, Eleanor won't be surprised. When we are at work Eleanor and I often go without lunches altogether because it's too much trouble to go out."

Now, I not being a genius, was shocked, my housewifely instinct being aroused.

"You might take your lunches with me," I suggested. "Then you would get them regularly."

"You are awfully kind, but when Eleanor has a sitter, or I have a model, we couldn't spare the time to go."

"Then I'll send them in on trays and you can nibble as you work. Just salads and fruit and milk."

"The very, very thing!" cried Munson, with the first and only enthusiasm I had ever seen in him. "That is the only thing necessary to complete my happiness."

"And," I continued, beaming, "when you want to stay in town for the night, I'll lend you those two big couches of mine that you can roll into Eleanor's studio."

Munson rose.

"It was Fate that sent you here to-day," he said, "and that made me forget to lunch at the Waldorf. I came down frightfully discouraged this morning thinking that I'd be compelled to rent this apartment to a stranger, and it was like the thought of parting with a friend. Now, I have all the use of it I need and all the comforts of a home thrown in."

"I must go home and tell Aubrey to make out your cheque," I said.

He shook hands with me and rubbed his silk hat with his sleeve, thereby making it worse.

"If I get that money, tell the old man I'll lend him five hundred," said Munson.

We parted, mutually pleased with each other.

When I told Aubrey, he expanded in a silent grin.

"There were once two impecunious families," he observed, "who sought to support themselves by taking in each other's washing."

"That is a vulgar translation of an idyl in high finance," I said. "I feel as if I had simply solved the problem of living."

But I propose and Bee disposes.

In all this I had carelessly omitted to take into consideration the fact that my sister's year of widowhood was over and that she would soon be at liberty to take the helm of our ship of state, so to speak.

Jimmie was the first to mention it. When we went, fairly bubbling, to tell them the news, he frowned a little because we had not come to him first, but when he saw our faces begin to go red, he changed his tactics to a more efficacious protest.

“ When is Bee coming back? ” he asked.

Unsuspiciously I answered.

“ In about a week! ”

“ Does she know what you have planned? ”

“ No, but — ” I began blithely.

Then I remembered Bee’s executive ability and my face fell. Whereat Jimmie grinned prodigiously, and felt that he was avenged because we didn’t go to him when we needed money.

But our view of Bee deserves an explanation. Most persons consider my sister Bee a very exclusive and haughty individual simply because she has some respect for her own personality. She does not claim to come under the head of the genus *hoi-polloi*. She does not go through life clapping her men friends on the back and kissing her women friends simply to show a degree of familiarity which she does not feel nor aspire to. Bee is dignified, cool, firm, diplomatic and ambitious. She is also worldly and philosophical.

On the other hand she is tender hearted to her own, with a supreme capacity for love; loyal unto death, as grateful for kindness as an Indian and equally as just in returning it. Her generosity is tempered by a nice study of her own resources. Consequently she never has to lie awake nights vainly lamenting rash

gifts of money poignantly needed for daily bread like *some* people I could mention.

But of all her characteristics, two stand out with salient distinctness. One, her diplomatic domination of home, family, friends, acquaintances and circumstances. The other her iron, unswerving, relentless, soundless determination to do — to quote Jimmie — as she jolly well pleases. Only he does not say “jolly well.”

Again to qualify. By that I do not mean that she defies public opinion by impulsive or unconventional acts. Far from it. Bee would suffer boredom until she ached before she would yawn frankly in a dull man’s face. She is conventionality itself to all outward appearances. Perfectly circumspect, perfectly turned out, perfectly correct in manner, dress and conversation is our Bee. But if she should be invited to spend a month in a friend’s house, and the wall paper in her friend’s private boudoir did not please Bee’s fastidious taste, she would so manipulate her friend’s mental perspective that the wall paper would come under derision. Then it would be decided to change it and Bee would be employed to drive down and help her friend select a different sort. But, such is Bee’s genius, to the day of her victim’s death, she would never suspect that

she had been the subject of mental suggestion.

What do you call that?

I call it a genius for administration. Bee never offends nor affronts the most sensitive vanity. Never wounds the most quivering Ego. Things simply go Bee's way. That's all.

And because Bee refuses to be drawn into the maelstrom of another's life and declines to be a straw on another's whirlpool, undiscriminating persons call her cold and selfish. Bee's selfishness is simply selfpreservation. She protects her own individuality. She declines to suffer the vicarious wear and tear of those who precipitate themselves into the lives of others.

Yet she is capable of single, distinguished acts of goodness — of following out occasional human clews in a manner highly to her credit. Indeed Bee is a woman of remarkable character and in spite of all the fun we make of her, we never do things without her advice that we are not sorry for it, so that after all, it really is more comfortable to let her run things. We have all the fun we want in registering kicks against her authority and then meekly yielding to her administration.

Aubrey, however, being an in-law, some-

times resents my habit of yielding to her judgment and therefore, to my intense surprise, for on Jimmie's hint I was perfectly willing to wait and consult, he went the next day and signed the lease with Munson.

When he told me I gasped.

"Where did you get the money, dear?" I cried.

"I always have money," said Aubrey, loftily displaying a large roll of bills. I have always suspected that he got them all in ones just to impress me.

I smiled at his reply. Then I found out that he had got it by mortgaging his peace of mind for a year and agreeing to change his play to suit a manager, fat of purse but lean of mind.

Thus did the Angel purchase liberty of one sort by the sale of freedom of another.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH BEE TAKES A HAND

I REPEAT I had not seen my sister since her husband died until she met us in New York.

Now, as I have said, one of Bee's salient characteristics is that she is always perfectly garbed for the time and place, so that the moment I looked at her clothes, I realized that a year had passed since she went into black.

When you come to think of it, mourning clothes are supremely vulgar. They are a mental speedometer. By them you can gauge the flight of time and the pace of your grief.

The first few months your deep bands of crape say: "I am feeling very miserable indeed. My grief is poignant. I suffer."

Then as your note paper gives you more room to write, it seems to say: "I am feeling better. I do not grieve as much. I am beginning to forget."

Then you leave off crape and appear only in dull black with no jewels and your speedome-

ter registers: "Many miles have been traversed from that open grave. We are nearing the frontier of a new country."

Then finally you leave off black and blossom forth in pastel shades and lo! You are over the border. You indicate to the world that your dead is forgotten.

Is this not vulgar as well as cruel and often untrue?

Many bands of crape are worn for unmourned dead and much crape is finally laid aside from wounds which never cease to ache.

When will this unnatural custom be discontinued among the civilized?

Bee never puts on, except to the public and then only to appease the public's own opinion. Her husband had been a nuisance both to himself and to others, so that Bee's mourning merely consisted of a discreet dropping of the eyes whenever his name was mentioned, a fingering of the black bordered handkerchief and perfectly irreproachable clothes.

How she managed this last we never knew, because she decried the act of a friend of ours who was so willing to part with her husband that she ordered her mourning tentatively the first day the doctor pronounced his case hopeless.

Bee disapproved of that. She said it was heartless and — unnecessary.

It was unnecessary for Bee, for all I could ever detect in her irreproachable behaviour during her brief but volcanic married life, were lightning glances shot at every mourning bonnet we saw — glances so comprehensive that they served Bee's purpose, yet so swift, that no one saw them but Jimmie and Aubrey.

But neither blamed Bee. Her husband was also named James, but we are all quite sure that nobody ever liked him well enough to call him Jim.

James had been tall, thin, transparent, with damp hands, wispy hair and a long, cold, red nose. It was not the convivial cup which had slightly reddened that unamiable member of James' features. As Jimmie said, we could have forgiven him if it had been — but James' nose was the thin, red nose of righteousness and acquisitiveness. He simply loved to be disagreeable, and in addition he was rich and close. Which to the Jimmies, the Jardines, and Bee, were three unpardonable crimes. We all loved good humour. Whenever we had money we strove to part with it as quickly and buoyantly as possible and we never even kept the change.

Therefore we thought it quite handsome of James to leave us to our own devices and go where he would be more appreciated.

He left but one blood relative, a sister. She was just like James except that his face was yellow and hers was blotched with red. But she was just as acidulous and the only time either of them ever smiled was after a remark or act which had made someone writhe.

James' sister was named Lydia — James always called her — "Lyddy" — and she was a hopeful spinster. Knowing that Bee did not care for her, James gave Lydia a home with them, which made my sister more wretched than anything in the world except an ill fitting gown. Thus Bee spent as much time away from her husband and charming sister-in-law as possible, and we profited by her most agreeable companionship in consequence.

The estate had been long in settling and at first it was thought there was no will, but finally one was discovered and it was Bee who told me of its contents by word of mouth. She never wrote to us about it while we were in Europe. Bee writes the funniest letters I ever read in my life. In one that I received in Poland she said: "James lies snoring on the couch in the library as I write. My life is filled with just such poetry and romance."

Which was a sample of her courage and sense of humour. She never complained of him. As she said: "I had eyes and ears, and it was all my fault." So then, she was too just to take it out either on him or others.

In her place, I should have been a widow earlier.

But Bee is very just. She let him have his chance to live.

Bee had been called away on business when we arrived, so that we had been back from Europe several weeks before we met.

She was most impressive, but although she was doubtless as anxious to talk of her own affairs as I was to hear her, she asked all about us and our travels, before she permitted her own plans to obsess her entire being.

Finally I took the plunge.

"Where are you going to live, Bee?"

"Here in New York!" said Bee, with scintillant eyes. "Where else in Heaven's name would anyone want to live?"

"And we heard that a will was found?"

"Oh, yes a most complete will, with everything arranged just as James wished to leave things after him."

"Just as he wished them to be!" I cried.
"Then—"

"Exactly!" said Bee, evenly. "'The evil

that men do lives after them!' with a vengeance in this case. I don't — really don't see how he managed to arrange everything in so complete a manner. He must have planned it for years."

My heart sank. Too well, knowing our dear James, I knew what that meant.

"But the house in Charityville," I said. "I thought he wanted you to live there. How do you get around that?"

"I got Lyddy's consent to live here instead. Anything that I can get her to do, can be done. She is sole executrix — as well as residuary legatee."

"Oh, Bee!" I cried impulsively. "I am so sorry for you!"

"Thanks, dear," said Bee, smiling bravely. "But I have had a year in which to be — not exactly reconciled, but accustomed to the thought. James must have been planning things for years."

"How are things left?"

"It is as pretty a plot as you would ever wish to see — " began Bee, smiling.

"You mean where James is buried?"

"No, I mean the way he left things. My good husband must have cherished quite an active grudge against me to have got his own consent to take so long a chance."

"But I don't understand," I said impatiently. "Get along with your story!"

"You know how — how *thrifty* James was when it came to parting with money?" inquired Bee.

"I know it used to take the skin off his palm when anybody could pry his hand loose from a dollar," I said crossly.

"Well, before his death, he gave — actually gave to Lyddy all his interest-bearing income-producing effects, so that — "

"What?"

"Exactly! I had to take my widow's third out of the Kokomo Land Company — in other words, I can get practically nothing until that huge, unproductive tract of land is sold, and — "

"And what?" I cried.

"Lyddy doesn't care to sell!"

I sat a moment in silence.

"Why Bee, where does that leave you?"

"Practically at Lyddy's mercy. At his death, Lyddy was rich, James land poor. He had given her every valuable thing in his possession in order to cheat me out of an income!"

This news was so overwhelming that I could think of nothing to say. But Bee, having had, as she remarked, a year in which to accus-

tom herself to the situation, had found her tongue.

Therefore she proceeded.

"I have had the best lawyers in such matters at work ever since I discovered the situation, and on all sides I find evidences of the far-reachingness of his revenge."

"But his revenge for what?" I asked.

"I think," said Bee, slowly, "that he was vexed because I could enjoy myself in spite of him. I believe he was jealous because we — all of us — could get away from him and have fun out of everything. I think he hated laughter and light heartedness and I know he hated people with a sense of humour. You remember how particularly he disliked Jimmie?"

"And me!" I said grimly. "He used to look as though he would enjoy throwing rocks at us when we howled about nothing at all — which to me is one of the joys of living."

"I know it is. And you have largely taught that view to me. Anyhow, if it hadn't been for you and the Jimmies, I couldn't have stood it — I'd have gone mad."

"It's too bad James was what he was," I said mournfully. "We'd have been so glad to take him on, if he'd been a decent sort. But he was — he was —"

"I know," said Bee evenly. "He *was!*"

"Well, but how are you going to live?" I asked.

"Oh," said Bee. "I have something — a tiny income, a third of the furniture, a third of James' personal effects — "

"A third of his old clothes!" I suggested ironically.

Bee smiled.

"Quite so! And — "

"Well, go on! What are you smiling at?"

"Don't be so impatient," said Bee.

"But you are so slow!" I cried.

"Well, — Lyddy has aspirations. It's too funny," she went on hurriedly, seeing by my lowering brow that I still did not understand and would not have much more circumlocution — Bee does love to produce an effect! — "but Lyddy too, has evidently been jealous all the time, of our fun, for she proposes to temporize — she practically offers to put the Kokomo land on the market, if I will, as she puts it, 'live under the same roof with her,' which I translate to mean — "

"Not that we'll have to take Lyddy on!" I whispered in a horror so actual and so excruciating that Bee must have been deeply pleased at the genuineness of my emotion.

Bee took her lower lip between her teeth and slowly nodded her head.

I flung myself face downward on the couch.

"Oh, don't cry!" said Bee anxiously.

"Have you lost all faith in me? Don't you know that I still propose to — to manage matters somewhat?"

"I cannot see one thing beyond the fact that Lyddy Lathrop is the most unalterably disagreeable person I ever knew in my life and that the fact of her wanting to come with us would destroy every vestige of my enjoyment in life. All I've got left is Aubrey!"

"True!" said Bee. "You've got him and she can't get him away from you nor even crowd in between. But Faith — "

"What?"

"Listen a minute."

"I'm listening, but I must say that I don't see a way out of it for — any of us. What are you going to do first?"

"I am supposed to be moving at this very minute," said my sister calmly.

"Moving!" I cried explosively. "Where to? Why didn't you tell me? Where are you going to live? In a hotel or an apartment? Or a house? Near here?"

"Don't stop, Faith!" said Bee. "It's sheer music to hear you reel off your observations like that. One learns so much of life from your fervid conversation."

I grinned at her. Her sarcasm sounded like old times.

“ You know those ducky new apartments next to where the Fitzhughs live? Well, Sallie Loring told me that Cedric Hamilton had taken one for himself, so I went to look and what do you think? There is a front one on the third floor just right for me and another just back consisting of three rooms, a bath and kitchennette which Lyddy wants. So we had the landlord cut a door between, and there we shall be, both literally under one roof and living amiably — ”

“ But with separate latch keys! ” I cried in overpowering admiration of my sister’s cleverness.

“ How wonderful that Lyddy should have wanted that apartment! ” I said.

Bee permitted herself a slow smile at my tribute to her powers of persuasion.

“ It is the best I could do under the circumstances, ” said Bee modestly. “ Lyddy desires to become one of us. She has acute matrimonial aspirations. She has unlimited ready money at her command. She can be led to do almost anything if one goes about it properly, but in order to do it properly — ”

“ To do her properly, ” I suggested.

"Quite so," agreed Bee. "One must know her peculiarities. *I* know them."

"Unhappily you do," I murmured.

"And I propose to do the best I can. Although she makes conditions —"

"Conditions? What sort?"

Bee waved her hand.

"Conditions which you will soon learn for yourself. I propose to circumvent her in every possible manner, because I consider James' will outrageous and because it annoys me to discover myself in a cul de sac, whence nobody expects me to emerge. Therefore I choose to interpret her commands one way — she declared that she and I must live together under one roof or — she practically threatens never to allow the property to be sold, thus leaving me with an income of less than I ever had before in my life."

I looked at my sister in pity. Truly for a young woman who was not condemned in some past existence to expiate a life spent in misdeeds, she had about dredged her weird in this. Almost every sort of domestic, mental calamity which could be imagined had been hers. She seemed no sooner to rise from one dizzying blow than she was felled to earth by another. Her friends never knew what sort of burdens she bore, for her indomitable pride

bade her bear them in secret, but I always knew and sometimes the Jimmies did.

Through it all, the thing which made us adore her was her uncrushable, implacable will to stand upright under everything. She never seemed to scramble to her feet, bruised and covered with dust. She rose gracefully and we always found her immaculate and scornful of our pity.

In fact she never pitied herself. Her sense of justice was so keen, she nearly always saw why these things came and she resolutely set herself to overcome them. She had worked out a philosophy of cause and effect which was rigidly self searching and which constantly dared its adherents to look themselves straight in the eye. You can't flinch much if you do that.

Bee was always hopeful, superbly patient in regard to ultimate success, though quite humanly impatient of daily obstacles and impediments. She seldom asked help of anybody and on the rare occasions when she did, it was always exactly in the line of one's work and therefore not only easy to give but reasonable to be asked to give it.

Thus when my sister found herself with ample means so tied up that to get even her share she must placate, pacify and cajole an

unpleasant elderly person, and with the added abomination of being obliged to live without daily fights with the most impossible of old maids I had ever encountered, I should not have been surprised to see Bee's spirits flag.

Not a bit of it!

She was capable of attending not only to her own affairs with magnificent courage, but of lending a hand in the administration of ours. And the way she concentrated on us, on Lyddy, on Bob Mygatt and his mix-up, to say nothing of Laflin Van Tassel and our affair with the Munsons is worthy of being told by one more skilled than I.

“And how about yourself?” she said, after we had finally left off discussing hers, chiefly because in our fluency, we had left nothing unsaid.

“Well, we—we have rented a studio apartment in the Buckingham studios—”

“Not the Munsons’?” said Bee in a muffled voice, seizing my arm with a grip as if I had said that I had rented a ward in a detention hospital.

“Yes, why?”

Bee leaned back in her chair and looked at me. It was the hopeless look of the finally discouraged.

“Do you know that there are folding doors

between Eleanor's studio and the one you have taken?" she said.

"Yes."

"You know that? But perhaps you haven't signed the lease?"

Her tone was distinctly hopeful.

"Yes, we have."

"Well, my advice to you — if you care for it — which perhaps you don't?"

"Yes, I do. What do you advise?"

"I advise you to nail up that door. Brick it up! And see as little of the Munsons as possible!"

"But Bee! What are you talking about? The Munsons are the most charming people we know except the Jimmies!"

"That's just why! I want you to stay friendly. With an open door between you, you might see each other every day."

"I am going to send them their lunches and —"

"Good Heavens, Faith! Sometimes I think you are only half witted!" said Bee slowly.

Now if her tones had been heated I should have resented her words. But she seemed to speak more in grief than in anger.

"And when they want to stay in town over night I am going to let them sleep in our studio or roll our big couches into Eleanor's,"

I continued valiantly, thinking it well for her to know the worst.

"There remains but one thing more to complete your utter ruin and that is for you to have money transactions with each other," said Bee. "That would certainly complete the catastrophe. And if you rent from him you'd have to!"

At that I remained ominously silent and Bee saw that she must explain without further questioning.

"You know the Munsons' reputation for, well—to put it mildly, eccentricity. *I* don't call it that. I consider them stark mad. I suppose Aubrey would call it the insanity of genius and that you both actually derive amusement from the history of their career. But to me they are dangerous because they are unknown quantities. They are social dynamite. Liable to blow themselves and all associated with them into infinitesimal bits without warning and without excuse. They are governed by no law. They are unaware of conventions. Munson confides their most private affairs to chance acquaintances, and anything told in confidence to him is current property inside of an hour. Munson simply leaks information into every open ear he passes.

"Now, you are about as safe with them as

a blazing match over a gasoline tank. You will go to mothering them, for they are either forlorn objects, worthy of anybody's pity, or else arrogantly soaring over the heads of even the richest and most successful. Just now, being down, they will appeal to you. You will work to get them orders, you will slave to make them comfortable. You will torment your friends to death trying to serve the Muns ons, and all of a sudden, when you least expect it, somebody he has only known half an hour will tell Munson that you, in your airy, funny way, have said something about him or his work, and without even coming to you decently to discover whether you did or not, Munson will turn on you, talk about you, tell everything he knows about you and insult you in a way you never will forgive. Then inside of two weeks he will come in, with a smile, ask for a whiskey and soda and begin just where he left off. In other words Munson will have forgiven himself for having insulted you!"

I listened to Bee with freezing marrow. Although I had never had the pleasure of a quarrel with Munson, I knew by the accuracy of Bee's observations on other phases of life, that she was perfect right on this matter.

"But he is so charming," I said. However

I said it as one speaks of a being who has passed out of one's life.

"Personally I don't find him so. I like Eleanor. There is more foundation to her. But Munson has the same damp, lifeless hand-shake that James had," said James' widow.

"Good Heavens!" I cried. "So he has! I never thought of it before."

"Rest assured," said my sister, "that characteristics show in trifles like that. I don't say just because they shake hands alike, that James and Munson have similar characteristics. I only say that something within tells me to shun Munson — that is, to shun familiarity with him."

"I believe so much in the way a man shakes hands," I faltered. Bee's calling my attention to this hitherto unnoticed characteristic had shaken my faith in Munson more than all she had said of her own opinion of him.

"So do I. Now, the lifelessness of James' grasp meant chiefly an unwillingness to give out anything he could keep for himself, whether sympathy, human interest or money. With Munson — "

"With Munson," I interrupted, "it means only a different branch of complete self-ness, for both Munson and Eleanor are an incarnation of the word Ego. They give — yes, you

could have their money, or the clothes off their back, because they don't value such things!" I cried, growing more and more excited in my sudden understanding of them, "but as for any interest in me or you or Aubrey, or our work—why, Bee! I told Munson eleven times about Aubrey's new play, and as we parted, he said: 'By the way, is Aubrey doing any writing these days?' He simply hadn't heard the sound of my voice when it was not discussing his affairs!"

"Exactly," said Bee, evenly. "Don't get so excited, Faith. You have known all this before."

"No, I haven't," I said despondently. "I didn't realize it until you called my attention to it."

"Well, don't go up in the air about it. You are probably planning to cut the Munsons off your list. Why can't you moderate your worship of your friends? Why must all your geese be swans?"

"Well, for one thing, I will take your advice and not let Aubrey borrow money from him," I said.

"I should think not. And for another thing, don't get behind in the rent even for a day. For he will tell it on you far and near, and he will hide behind the fact that you owe

him money to stave off every creditor he possesses."

Again I shivered.

"As an example of how his ignorance of business injures people, a man of means agreed to pay him a certain rent for his old studio quarterly. Yet Munson told me six weeks ago that his tenant had gone to Mexico owing him six hundred dollars; and he gave me the impression that the man had absconded. Munson said he might have to bring an action to get his rent. Since then every time I have heard this man's name mentioned I have expected to hear of his arrest. Yesterday I heard that he will be back in three weeks and the rent isn't even due until January. I tell you, Faith Jardine, Edward Munson is the most dangerous man a woman like you could interest herself in."

"What kind of a woman am I, Bee?"

Bee leaned back and crossed her feet. I could see that she intended to enjoy herself.

"What kind of a woman are you?" she repeated, not to gain time, but as a sort of appetizing hors d'œuvre to the mental meal of which she was about to make of me.

Just then the telephone rang and I flew to answer it.

"It's the Jimmies!" I announced beamingly.

CHAPTER III

FROM A SISTER'S POINT OF VIEW

“YOU are just in time,” I said as we greeted them, “to assist at a clinic!”

“A what?” said Mrs. Jimmie.

“A clinic!” I repeated. “At my earnest request Bee was about to give me her unvarnished opinion of me.”

“You have been under the knife so often,” said Jimmie, “I should think you wouldn’t even need chloroform.”

“Indeed she has not,” said Bee, warmly. “Faith very seldom hears the truth about herself. Aubrey flatters her to death, and I never express the whole of my opinion unless asked for it.”

“But Bee, dear, don’t you admire Faith the way we all do?” asked Mrs. Jimmie uneasily.

“I admire her good points extravagantly, dear Mrs. Jimmie,” said Bee. “But in spite of them, I think — I really think that Faith is the most uncomfortable person to live with I ever knew in my life.”

I drew in my feet a trifle, involuntarily, and Jimmie fumbled in his pockets hurriedly.

"Wait a minute, Bee," he begged. "Just wait till I find a match."

He hastily lighted a large, black cigar, leaned back, blew a long, thin line of smoke in the air, grinned and said:

"Now, Bee!"

I expected this of him. He was simply delighted at the prospect of seeing me dissected.

"First of all," began Bee, "you are never consecutively truthful. You are a creature of moods. You analyze yourself for the amusement of others, not intending to deceive, but you do deceive."

Jimmie laughed until he choked on cigar smoke.

"But," continued Bee, "your fibs are always at your own expense. You never really do the terrible things you declare yourself capable of doing, so that really you are much finer than you believe yourself to be."

Jimmie looked so astonished — nay, so flat and so distinctly disappointed at this that I had to laugh. I was immensely flattered, but to tell the truth, I was as much surprised as he was. Not once in a million years does Bee say anything decent to me, for while we adore

each other, we simply loathe each other's ideals in life. I consider mine much higher than Bee's, but she is positive that nobody but a fool would cherish mine and that hers reflect credit on their owner both for wisdom and policy.

"Then," pursued my sister, with evident pleasure in the sensation she was creating, "you are not to be depended upon. You flatter yourself that you are, but that is only another of your mistaken estimates of yourself. Your best friends never know when you will go all to pieces over some trifle. You have no self control. You burst into tears in public and disgrace Aubrey — "

"Aubrey doesn't mind!" I cried.

"And me," pursued Bee placidly, "in ways a grown up married woman should scorn to do. One night at a roof garden, the conversation turned on McKinley's death and you cried. At least two years after he had died."

"Well, — "

"There is no excuse for such things. They only embarrass the self-possessed. Of course the public is not supposed to know that you enjoy crying — that you can cry one minute and burst out laughing while the tears are still pouring down your face."

"I don't enjoy it!" I muttered.

"Yes, you do!" cried Jimmie. "By Jove! I believe you do!"

"She does not!" said Mrs. Jimmie, throwing the bomb of a flat contradiction into our devoted midst. "Faith is only very emotional, far more quick to see the pity of a thing than we. And as for trying to control herself, I have seen her lip bleed from biting it!"

At this sweet and unexpected defence of my great weakness, I gave what Jimmie called "an imitation of a lady weeping" with great promptness.

"You see!" said Bee, calmly.

"Go on and geyser, Faith, if it does you any good," said Jimmie with a grin.

"It's — it's because what d-dear Mrs. Jimmie said makes me — f-feel so sorry for m-myself!" I stammered.

"Spotlight!" said Jimmie.

"Exactly!" said Bee. "You are so overcome by the dramatic qualities of your onion-like capacity to weep at notice that you at once feel sorry enough for yourself to cry. As I have observed before, it affords exquisite discomfort to your friends."

"Go on!" I said, dabbing my eyes dry. "It is fascinating to hear you tell it."

“Again. You pride yourself on your interest in and your generosity to your friends. But the truth of the matter is that while you do fairly wear yourself out for them, you expect the same fervour from them in your own times of need, and when you don't get it, you are furious. You are either working like a slave for your friends or crying out at their rank ingratitude.”

“Ha! ha!” laughed Jimmie, suddenly.

I glared at him, and even his wife looked a reproof which is the most she ever does. If Jimmie were my husband, I'd throw him into the river a dozen times a day. But Mrs. Jimmie only looks at him in dear reproach.

“And just because your purse hangs open all the time, you think others' should be so too. But other people keep their money.”

This remark admitted of so many changes being rung on it, from the point of view of James, Lyddy, the Jimmies, and ourselves, that we all indulged in a silent but sympathetic smile before Bee proceeded.

“Most people hate the feeling of gratitude—”

“Not one in a million knows what it feels like,” I snapped out.

“They don't want to feel it. Personally

I'd rather never have a favour done for me than suffer the strain of gratitude, so that really you—" "

"You are making out that I am a nuisance!" I cried.

"Not at all," said Bee smoothly. "I am simply trying to show you that you do not understand yourself as we understand you."

"That is all very well," I said, hotly.
"But—" "

"But we don't all agree with dear Bee, clever as she undoubtedly is," said Mrs. Jimmie quietly. "She doesn't mean what she says. She adores Faith just as we all do, and we wouldn't have her dear funny ways changed any more than — than Aubrey would, even if we could. We love her just as she is. Don't we, Jimmie?"

Jimmie crossed over and took his wife's hand.

"I'd hate to say under oath that I approve of everything that Faith does and is, because I might go to jail if it could be proved on me. But I'll say it of *you* if you want me to!"

"But Jimmie!" said his wife with pink cheeks, half pushing him away. "I don't want you to say it of me —"

"All right!" said Jimmie reproachfully.

"At least not in public!" she hastily added. Jimmie's eye twitches. He doesn't exactly wink.

"I feel that Bee ought to write novels, she has such an admirable way of sketching our characters," I said.

"Is that smile of yours intended to be bitter?" asked Jimmie of me, with a great show of anxiety. "Because if it is, you should never go on the stage. You are grinning like a chessy cat at Bee's description of you."

"I have no intention of going on the stage," I remarked.

"Perhaps not now you haven't," said Jimmie. "It is now only a quarter to six. At six you might decide to star as Othello."

"If I ever do," I said, "I should insist upon your playing Desdemona, Jimmie. It would be unmitigated joy for me to put a pillow over your mouth and then sit on it."

"Fie, fie! My dear! What a temper you have!" said Jimmie gently.

At this critical juncture the Angel appeared, and after we had all hailed his advent after our various kinds, he rang for ice and a syphon, at which Jimmie drew a deep anticipatory sigh of bliss.

"Bee, dear, where are you staying?" asked Mrs. Jimmie.

Then Bee told the Jimmies what she had just told me, and I leaned back while Jimmie sat up.

I enjoy Jimmie when he is angry. He is so sincere. But he finally talked himself into a state of exhaustion, whereupon Bee said abruptly:

"Hope Loring's wedding cards are out. Did you know it, Faith?"

"Yes," I said. "Ours came yesterday."

"So did ours," said Jimmie. "Doesn't it seem good to see John Loring on his feet again! He is one of the finest men I ever knew in all my life."

"Do you know the family well?" asked Bee.

"Fairly so!"

"Do you?" asked Bee, turning to Aubrey.

"So—so!"

"All of them? The cousins?"

The Angel nodded.

We all looked expectantly at Bee, but she said no more. But I knew there was something behind her innocent question. I simply waited.

It was Aubrey who broke the silence.

"I met one of them, Laflin Van Tassel, you know. And he told me that the famous law-suit has finally been settled and his mother

won. She sued the administrators of her grandfather's estate for an accounting, and will recover a million or more, so that Laflin at once becomes an interesting figure in society."

"How nice!" I said. "But isn't it true that 'them as has, gits.' For Laflin has already made a name for himself as an architect and would have got on in his profession without money. Do you know him, Jimmie?"

Jimmie nodded.

"Good looking chap."

"He's the handsomest thing I ever saw," I said frankly. "And to think of his getting all that money. I never even saw a good looking millionaire before. Most rich men's looks are such that a compensating Providence simply had to give them money to even things up!"

Jimmie sat up, suddenly intelligent.

"You want to know, whether it's in cash or not? And what bank it's in, Bee?" he asked.

Bee looked annoyed.

"I don't even know him," she said distantly. "I only know the Lorings."

"His uncle, John Loring, is devoted to him," said Mrs. Jimmie, "which means a great deal to me."

Bee looked down. She never lets us see into her eyes when she thinks things.

"None of you can guess who else has finally made a ten strike — not that any of you will particularly care," said Aubrey.

"Who?"

"Bob Mygatt. His opera — his magnus opus has finally found a manager."

"It's only a feather-fingered musical comedy," said Jimmie. "Opera indeed! Does he call it an opera?"

"He generally alludes to it as his 'chuff duff,'" I said. "He is so funny."

"He is a dear," said Bee, beaming. "I am so glad to hear of his good luck."

"He is charming," said Mrs. Jimmie.

"Just listen," said Jimmie to Aubrey. "Women always rave about a fellow like that. What do you think of him, old man?"

"Do you want my private opinion of Bob Mygatt?" asked Aubrey, in his quiet voice.

"I do."

"Well," said the Angel, quietly. "I think he is more kinds of a damnfool than any other person, male or female, that I ever have had the pleasure of knowing."

Aubrey meets with the usual fate of those who seldom use violent language. When he does he prostrates his audience.

"Lyddy has met him," said Bee softly.

"Already?"

"And she says he has the most delightful manners of any man she ever knew. He kissed her hand at parting."

Jimmie writhes so when he laughs, I love to watch him.

"I think," said Bee, "that one reason Lyddy was so willing to take that separate apartment — "

"Bee, don't," shrieked Jimmie. "I can't bear it!"

Even Aubrey grinned at Jimmie's joy.

"Was because I should not always be there to see him take leave of her?"

"He's engaged!"

Aubrey's bombshell had the desired effect.

"Engaged!" cried Bee. She was so plainly disconcerted that I looked at her in surprise. She instantly recovered herself and added, "How annoying! The Bob Mygatts of this world should never be engaged. They belong to all of us."

"Anybody is welcome to my share of 'em," said Jimmie, cheerfully.

"Whom is he engaged to?" I demanded.

"A beautiful girl who is to sing the principal rôle in his piece," said Aubrey. "I've never seen her, but I've heard her voice

and it is a very fine one — a clear, high soprano."

"You must get to know her, Aubrey," said Bee. "You could, couldn't you?"

"What for?" asked the Angel.

"Oh, just because!"

"Ask Mygatt to bring her to see you, Bee," said Jimmie. "That's the proper caper, isn't it?"

"True," said Bee, rising and shaking out her mourning. It quite brought us to our senses to see Bee in black. Even Jimmie hastily gulped down the last of his drink and choked on a piece of ice as he started to his feet.

"When may we come to see you, Bee, dear?" I cried almost dancing in my excitement. "Can't we come to-night?"

"If you don't mind sitting on boxes, come by all means."

"Oh, what fun to have you living here!" I cried, flinging my arms around her neck, regardless of her "blacks."

"We are coming too, Bee," declared Jimmie.

"Why, of course you are," she answered. "Don't we all belong to the Happy Family?"

"Have you told her?" demanded Jimmie with dropped jaw.

"Certainly not," answered his wife, with a surprised look at Bee. " Didn't I promise not to?"

"Then," announced Jimmie, beaming with importance, "I shall have something nice to tell you all — to-night!"

And so saying, and in spite of our agonized questions, Jimmie went out hurriedly, grinning with cheerful malice at our baffled curiosity.

CHAPTER IV

BEE AND HER CELLARETTE

AS usual Bee had got exactly what she wanted. This time it was an apartment, beautifully suited to her needs, close to her best friend, Sallie Fitzhugh, and with more little conveniences than any apartment I had ever seen.

"And I do believe it will be as quiet as one can be in New York," said Aubrey wistfully.

"Possibly it will," said Bee, "just because I don't care whether it is or not. The boy next me at the hotel where I was, played a drum."

She smiled at our horrified faces. But before we could say more, the door was pushed open and Bee's sister-in-law, Lyddy, made her appearance.

Poor Lydia Lathrop! We always tried to be pleasant at first, but we are easy going folk and will not strive long to be good in any direction. We follow the line of least resistance and only strive persistently to amuse ourselves.

Jimmie sums up the situation neatly when he says:

“I suppose it really isn’t Lyddy’s fault that her knuckles are red and shiny.”

“What *I* object to,” said Aubrey, “is the general dampness of her personality. If you shake hands with her, her hands are damp. If you pick up her handkerchief it is always damp. If you touch her gloves they are always damp.”

But what worried me was the dampness of her personality. She always regarded our chatter with each other as covert insults directed specifically at herself, and to be pierced with Lyddy Lathrop’s eye just as you were saying something foolish, but which all the others would love, was to feel as if an icicle had dropped down your back.

“Well, Lyddy,” I said nervously. I always had to be the first to speak, because the others wouldn’t.

“Well, Faith!” she retorted, as Jimmie would say, “with rare wit.”

Dear Mrs. Jimmie came to the rescue as usual.

“I have not seen you since your poor brother’s death, to say how sorry I feel for you in your grief,” she said in her soft voice.

“You wrote all that was necessary,” said

Lyddy. Then seeing by our sudden silence how enraged we were that the only decent one among us had been so hatefully rebuffed, she added:

“But I’ve no doubt you mean well.”

“Yes, we mean well,” said Jimmie. “We are just poor, simple folk who blunder in our speech, that’s all.”

“But while we are not clever we can truthfully call ourselves good natured and tidy, can we not?” I added, looking around for encouragement.

I was recalled to the sale of the Kokomo land by Bee’s peaceful rejoinder:

“Lyddy stayed at home and worked all the time I was with you, so her apartment is nearly settled. Don’t you want to show it to them, Lyddy?”

“I don’t know that I want to show them, but if they choose to go in and look at it, I shall not prevent them.”

“Such cordiality shall not go unrewarded,” said Jimmie. “We accept your kind invitation, Miss Lathrop, with pleasure.”

“Jimmie!” murmured his wife reproachfully.

“I had to, love, or I should have hit her under the ear with a hambone.”

As we were all filing through the door, Bee's telephone rang and she turned around with a queer look after answering it.

"Whom do you think it is?" she said, biting her lip.

"Who?" we demanded in a breath.

"Bob Mygatt. He says he went around to see you, Faith, and they told him where you were."

"That's strange," I said. "The hotel people didn't know where we were."

"He must have come to see Lyddy!" said Jimmie, as the broadest joke he could think of at the time. But to our unbounded joy, Lyddy fled for a mirror, where she nervously put herself to rights.

We nearly suffocated trying not to let her hear us.

Then, with a bang, the door flew open, and Bob was in our midst.

Bob was almost good looking and, to most of us, wholly amusing in his impudence; but the Angel and Jimmie disliked him with a wholesome fervour which almost partook of athletics in the violence of its exertion.

When Lyddy came in, Bob called her his "Dear Lady," and kissed her hand, Jimmie watching him in fascinated silence. Then he

sat down on the floor at her side, clasped his knees and looked up into her face with the adoring eyes of a faithful dog.

These two were so absorbed in each other that they did not join our clamour to know what Jimmie's secret was, but when we finally got it out of him and found that he had bought a glorious big touring car, Bobbie's ear was suddenly cocked in our direction, and soon afterward he deserted Lyddy and propelled himself, still in that sitting posture, to my side.

"Ah, ha! I thought you would remember our existence when you heard the word automobile," I said cruelly. But in reality it was because I do not like to see an agreeable man waste himself too long on another woman. I am not jealous. I am only particular.

Bob looked at me reproachfully.

"That's mean," he said. "I am not after the crumbs which fall from a rich man's table. I am a rich man myself — or at least I am going to be, if the brutes handle my play as they should."

"That is what we are always thinking — that we are going to be rich to-morrow. But to-morrow never comes."

"It came once, but you blew it all in — "

"Tell me about your — " I began hastily.

“About my play?”

“No. About your engagement. I’ve just heard of it.”

“Who told you?” he said with a cloudy face.

“Aubrey. Who is the girl?”

“She is a cousin of Mrs. Winthrop, and her name is Ava Corliss.”

“A cousin of Mrs. Gallup Winthrop!” I cried. “That is a fine family. She must have loads of money.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t belong to the rich side of the family — worse luck!”

“Bob, are you mercenary?”

“No, but I’m jolly well tired of being poor. You can’t call me mercenary when I am engaged to a poor girl.”

“Is she really poor?”

“As Job’s turkey. Has to support herself.”

“Yes, you are mercenary, because you half regret it. It’s your Irish sentimentality which made you fall in love with her.”

“I showed good sense in falling in love with her. She’s just the girl to keep me straight — got a conscience that sticks out so you bark your shins against it every time you get near enough to her to shake hands, bu’ I was a fool to ask her to marry me, because unless my play is a sucess, it will be thirty or

forty years before we can marry. Besides that, she rakes up a man's past, with a — ”

“ But everybody says your play is so foolish it is bound to be a success. Now York is the home of musical silliness,” I said cheerfully. But my interruption did not stave off his confidence. It only deferred it.

He looked up at me and grinned. Then he sighed.

“ I'll tell you all about it, sometime. I'm in a lot of trouble, but I can't talk about it here. So long, I must get back to my lady love,” he said, as if I had begged him to confide.

And with that he resumed his place by Lyddy and we heard him beseech her not to send him away again.

But evidently Bee could stand this no longer, for she rose and said:

“ I didn't ask you all here to-night to spend an evening in sweet idleness. Jimmie, won't you and Aubrey hang pictures for me?”

Lyddy looked up with acid in her voice, as she said:

“ Why disturb things, Bee?”

“ I have no intention of disturbing you and Bob,” began Bee.

“ In fact, I think she suggested it out of courtesy — to leave you and Bob alone together,” I said.

Lyddy smiled at me, and Bob cut in fervently:

"Oh, do leave us alone! Go away — all of you! I want to have my lady all to myself all the rest of the evening!"

And he hitched himself nearer to her, and resumed his adoring-dog glances.

Jimmie marched out without a backward glance.

When we were all safely out of ear shot, he turned to Bee and exploded:

"I don't know what your game is, but I tell you right now, don't you ever invite that fool to be one of any party you make up for the automobile, for I won't stand it! Of all the — "

"Certainly not, Jimmie," said Bee soothingly. "Have you named it yet?"

"Why, yes," said Jimmie, his brow smoothing under Bee's tact. "Didn't I tell you? In honour of us all, I have named it 'The Happy Family.' "

"How many will it hold, Jimmie?" I demanded, visions of taking all my friends to ride in it floating through my brain.

"Seven. I thought it was of no use to get a smaller one when you and Bee are so hospitable."

I giggled. And Mrs. Jimmie beamed with happiness.

Suddenly Jimmie paused in his inspection of Bee's apartment and exclaimed:

"What's this, Bee?"

"Open it and see!"

I knew from Bee's modest pride that she had done something worthy of praise, and so she had, for the thing was a cellarette and such a cellarette that I was sure it had been made to order.

As we opened it, a vision of good things met our eye, all appetizingly packed and icy cold.

Jimmie and the Angel hung over it fascinated.

"Lobster!" murmured Aubrey.

"Who is?" demanded Jimmie.

"You seem to be alive," I said. "Though I have often felt that you could be spared!"

"Beer!" said the Angel. "And a jar of mayonnaise already made! And Swiss cheese and rye sandwiches! Bee, how did you manage all this on moving day?"

Bee was satisfied by his tone of respectful admiration. We sat back and watched the Angel set the table.

"Why don't you help him, Faith?" demanded Jimmie.

I waved my hand.

"I've trained him to do it and I don't want to spoil him," I said. "Why don't you help him yourself? I've never regarded you as at all ornamental, particularly in repose."

"I'd drop things. Say, Bee, do we have to call Lyddy?"

"Certainly, Jimmie. Our dear Lyddy will be one at all our little gatherings in the future —"

"After that — death!" said Aubrey. But again we forgot how Bee works.

"Not in the motor?" demanded Jimmie aghast.

"Certainly!" said Bee, firmly.

"I'd never have bought the thing if I'd known that!" said Jimmie, fiercely, "I call it a confounded shame, Bee, to make me!"

"Why, Jimmie," said his wife, deeply shocked. "How can you be so outspoken? You might hurt dear Bee's feelings. He didn't mean anything, Bee. Lyddy will be always welcome whenever you care to bring her. We know how tried you will be during this coming year, and anything that anyone of us can do to make this easier for you, we will gladly do."

Bee bent over and kissed her. That was all there was to do most of the time. Her

heavenly sweetness, as Jimmie said, "always knocked our eye out."

We made Jimmie call Lyddy and Bob and we all gathered around Bee's tiny dining-room table to partake of our first meal with her.

We all had it in mind, but of course it was poor old Jimmie who blurted into saying it.

"By Jove, Bee!" he cried. "This is the first time we ever sat down to your table, isn't it? Ouch!"

This last registered two swift kicks that he got sub rosa, so to speak.

Lyddy fixed him with her eye and rose manfully to the occasion.

"That is right, Mr. Jimmie! Remind me, right to my face of my poor dead brother's peculiarities and his domestic unhappiness! It pleases both his widow and his sister to have his unfortunate disposition remarked upon! Pray go on!"

"Oh, I say!" gasped Jimmie, looking wildly around for a sympathetic eye. But he met only a circle of flushed faces, partly concealed by friendly napkins.

"Don't suppose," pursued Lyddy relentlessly, "that I am unaware of the outrageous manner in which you, all of you, habitually not only regarded my poor brother's eccentrici-

ties, but talked about them among yourselves!
I know!"

She drew in her chin bridling. Our consternation was so patent that Lyddy was enjoying herself rarely. Emboldened by our lack of spirit, she went on.

"My poor brother was in reality one of the most unfortunately placed (with a glare at Bee), most deliberately misunderstood, (with a glare at me), disagreeably ridiculed (we were all in on this) unkindly treated man who ever lived. At heart he was—"

Here Bobbie, whom we had all forgotten in our fright, took a hand. My single lucid recollection of the following speech is the way a morsel of lobster trembled on my fork during the entire time.

"Dear lady," he said, covering Lyddy's shiny knuckles with his hand. "Why bluff? Why not admit the truth? *I* knew your brother—God rest his soul!—and a stinger, meaner, more warped old misanthrope never breathed! Every time I look at you, I wonder, I actually wonder how so gentle and sweet a soul as yours was ever the twin of his! Your brother did his best to kill the friendship of everyone who ever felt kindly toward him, and that his widow is alive to-day is largely due to the fact that her family took her away

from him and her friends kept her in Europe all they could. For my part, no ocean was big enough to separate your brother from me. Once when I was getting over typhoid fever and was sick and in debt, I tried to borrow a hundred dollars from him. I shall never forget his pungent remarks to me as he refused my request. Why pretend, sweet lady? You know you are as glad the purse strings are for ever loosed, as the rest of us!"

Lyddy's eyelids are pinkish anyway and her eyes weak, but during this extraordinary speech, I thought they would have blinked out of sight altogether. She tried to explode, but Bobbie kept a firm grip of her hand and at the end gravely raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"Ah — rash — hoo!" sneezed Jimmie, having absently peppered his napkin and then inhaled its contents.

"For my part," proceeded Bob, "I've always been beastly sorry for Bee — you see I didn't know you then, sweetheart — and from now on I vote that you, who knew him best and realize what Bee must have suffered, take the lead in giving Bee a rip-roaring old time, and let's all help her to forget that she ever knew the old curmudgeon."

Lyddy breathed stertorously during the aw-

ful daring of this, for Lyddy's persecution of Bee was second to none, but Bob's keen blue eyes, with their captivating twinkle, held Lyddy's until she grinned foolishly.

"Oh!" I said involuntarily.

"I beg your pardon!" whispered Jimmie.
"I was trying to kick Bob."

"To kick him!" I murmured. "Then do you like him after all!"

"I could kiss him," said Jimmie, still weeping from the pepper. "And as soon as I get this damned — "

"Take a fresh napkin," I urged, handing him one.

"There! That'll do! That'll *do*, I say!"
(It is always such a pleasure to try to help Jimmie.) "Say, old man," he continued, turning to Bob, "come for a trial spin in my new touring car to-morrow. We are all going."

"Are *you*?" asked Bob of Lyddy.

"Well," she said, biting her lips and pleating the hem of her handkerchief. "I will if I'm asked!"

"You'll be asked or I'll refuse to go!" said Bob firmly.

"Course she's going," growled Jimmie, reluctantly, urged to a tardy hospitality by three stern pairs of eyes which focussed him to his duty.

Then we fell to and partook of Bee's dainties. But in addition to the usual condiments they were seasoned by agitated thought and mingled emotions.

"Come to our studio to-morrow night," I commanded.

"That will be nice," said Mrs. Jimmie. "We can go there after you have dined with us at Claremont after our ride."

"Have you an automobile large enough to hold all of us," demanded Lyddy, as we rose to go.

"Yes," said Jimmie. "Three or even four on the back seat, then two single and separate seats in the middle and either one or two on the front seat, depending upon who drives the machine."

Lyddy pondered the adaptability of that arrangement. Then she turned to Bob.

"I wonder how much an electric runabout would cost which holds only two?"

As we all fell into the tiny hall at once, we failed to hear Bob's reply.

Jimmie peeked through the crack of the door.

"He took that hurdle without a smile," he whispered. "They are holding hands!"

Then Bob joined us with an innocent eye.

Aubrey shook hands with him gravely and Jimmie slapped his shoulder.

No one said a word.

"But what does it all mean?" I said anxiously to the Angel as we got home. "He's engaged and he loves the girl. He told me so to-night. How will this end?"

"There is but one who knows," said the Angel solemnly.

"You mean — ?" I whispered.

"No, I mean Bee!" answered the Angel with a grin.

"Oh!"

CHAPTER V

OUR FIRST STUDIO DINNER

ALL the next day, to our bitter disappointment, it rained torrents, so that to try the new automobile was out of the question.

Our goods arrived in boxes, however, and by dint of using tarpaulins we got them under cover without serious wetting.

Something had happened to the steam and we had no heat, so we wandered around our big studio, in whose vastness our great boxes only took up little dabs of space, feeling forlorn and miserable and not half as proud and happy as we had expected to be.

Two men from the *Æolian* company had been there all day voicing the Munsons' big organ, after Aubrey, with the help of the janitor, Blackman, had connected the motor with an electric light fixture. I rather grudged the space the thing took up — about an eighth of the whole studio — but Munson didn't want to move it, and the Angel thought it would be

nice to have it, especially as it could be played by hand as well as by rolls, so we agreed to let it remain.

About four o'clock, in through the open door walked my first neighbour — an artist in the building — Mrs. Keep. As she was the only one who ever showed herself in the least friendly, or in any way cultivated the delights of our acquaintance, the others contenting themselves with severe criticisms of us, because we were not painters, I recall her sweet friendliness with "a gratitude so fervent as to be almost base," as Bee puts it.

"Can I do anything to help you?" were her first words.

I beamed at her.

"You remind me of Mrs. March in Little Women," I said. "She always came in with just that lovely manner."

Mrs. Keep laughed.

"It's too cold for you here. Come down into my studio and have a cup of tea." In half an hour I was back again, bursting in on Aubrey an hysterical but wholly transformed woman.

"Oh, oh, oh!" I cried dancing up and down in a frenzy of excitement. "What do you think Mrs. Keep is going to do? Do you know who she is? She's the one who painted

the Mowgli series that you and I had such a fit about — in the magazine — the what-do-you-call-it — don't you remember? And in colour they're a million times more beautiful — I just wish Kipling could see 'em! — he'd go wild. And what do you think she is going to do! She's going to let me have them here — hang 'em, you understand! On those five gaping wall spaces that have made me sick all day wondering what we would put there! Our pictures would look like postage stamps. When I said that, she howled and offered them. Isn't she dear? Oh, Aubrey, if you could only see the one where Mowgli is leaning against the panther with the little bear — what was his name? coming up in front. And the colours! The blue black of the panther's fur is indicated in the sheen of Mowgli's hair. And he has such a woodland, wild, untamed little face — just as if he never had known any human beings, and to think we are to have those five heavenly mural paintings to look at every day and every night — ”

I stopped and began to cry.

“ Now, now,” said Aubrey, gently. “ Don't get so excited. You are all trembling. And your poor hands are quite cold.”

“ It's having seen so much beauty!” I wailed.

"But don't cry about it. What would Bee say?"

I wiped my eyes.

"I'm glad she didn't see," I said.

"But I did see," said Bee from the doorway, and I whirled around guiltily conscious of dim eyes, to see Bee and the Jimmies. Lyddy, the genial soul, had fortunately been detained.

"Good Lord in heaven!" said Jimmie, looking around. "What a barn of a place!"

And he immediately began pacing it off.

"Thirty-five by thirty!" he announced with pride.

Jimmie walked around shaking his head.

"It's the greatest place I ever saw," he said finally. "Mary, have you seen this dining-room? It runs the length of the apartment, except for the width of the kitchen. Having the kitchen in front is bad—very bad."

"No, it isn't. It's nice," I cried, combative as usual.

"And this little staircase, for all the world like a yacht," said Mrs. Jimmie.

"And upstairs, three bedrooms, five closets and a bath," called Bee.

"And the balcony over the door practically gives you another room, doesn't it?"

"It's simply great!" commented Jimmie.

Just then against the huge twelve-foot window in the studio came a blast of weather which flung open the two lower doors of the window, flooding the floor with water and blowing down candlesticks and books and all objects which were not nailed to the floor.

Everybody flew to rescue something breakable, while Jimmie and Aubrey succeeded in getting the windows shut at the expense of a serious wetting.

Then began such a storm as none of us had ever seen before, of rain and wind and hail.

After half an hour of it, Jimmie pulled me over into a corner and said:

“ Faith, let me telephone for some stuff to be sent in, and let’s unpack some of these packing boxes and build a fire in that grand old fireplace with ‘em, and have a regular old jag of joy all the evening, will you?”

“ Oh, Jimmie, what a dear you are to think of it! Do let’s. The storm makes the idea simply perfect, doesn’t it?”

Jimmie grinned at my praise and forthwith went to the telephone. Then Aubrey called up Blackman, and before long even the elevator boys were in the vein of the thing and were bringing up old boxes and bits of lumber, for several of the apartments were not yet finished,

so that in half an hour we had a roaring fire and the apartment was warm for the first time that day.

“But won’t it put you out, Faith?” asked Mrs. Jimmie. “Have you a cook?”

“Have I? Wait till you see her! She is a coloured girl, black as the ace of spades and her name is Pearl Marguerite!”

Just the lady in question appeared in our midst. Her eyes were rolling wildly and she twisted her apron nervously.

“Mis’ Jardine,” she said. “I’d lake to speak to you just one minute.”

I got up from a soap box and left the fire reluctantly.

“Jes’ see what done come!” whispered Pearl Marguerite. “Hyah’s a dozen squabs and a salad all done mixed in dis yere bowl, en two dozen years ob cawn — raw — en all dese ayschers awn de half shell awn ice, en — ”

“Has the stuff come?” asked Jimmie, sticking his head through the swinging door. “I thought you’d have potatoes and coffee, but I ordered everything else. Let’s see. Oysters and squab and claret cup and — ”

“Jimmie, it’s a feast!” I said reproachful but anticipatory. We had had little to eat all day and were ravenous.

Pearl Marguerite whispered again:

“ Shall I cook our steak too?”

“ Cook everything in sight! We’ll set the table for you. Isn’t it a good thing now, that you have spent your day washing the Munsions’ dishes and getting your pantries in order?”

“ Ef you all will set de table foh me, you kin begin awn yo’ ayschers soon ez you please!” said Pearl Marguerite, rising to the occasion manfully.

“ Let’s bring the table in the studio,” said Jimmie, in another burst of inspiration, “ and eat here by the fire.”

Mrs. Jimmie, Bee and I made short work of setting that table, and soon we heard the clink of ice in glasses, which told us that the Angel was also at his share of the work.

That first studio dinner of ours, beside a roaring fire made of wooden boxes, was one long to be remembered, not the least of which was our utter ignorance of what the future held for us. I particularly recall putting in a half barrel filled with paper, excelsior and bits of kindling wood — it had been, in fact, our waste basket during the day — and the glorious way that half barrel burned, especially the awful moment in which we thought we had set the chimney on fire, added just the brief

scare necessary to our peculiar idea of enjoying ourselves.

Pearl Marguerite warmed up the squabs and served them with bits of bacon frizzling on the breast of each, and seemed to enjoy our enthusiastic comments on the amount of fried potatoes she deemed worthy of giving us with the steak. But when, after we had eaten, until as Jimmie gracefully expressed it, he could feel his necktie bind his throat, Pearl Marguerite added the final touch of elegance to our repast by appearing in the double doorway, twirling her fingers, rolling her eyes and asking if we would have our coffee in large cups or in "demi-chaises," I thought Jimmie would never come to.

It was upon our peals of laughter that Blackman arrived, entirely concealed behind a large canvass, which proved to be the first of Mrs. Keep's Mowgli murals. And when the others were borne in also, the others shared my raging appreciation, and Blackman, at nine o'clock at night, was called upon to fetch the twenty-foot step-ladder which belonged to the house, and forthwith help to hang everyone of the five, while I sat on my soap box and blinked and swallowed but dared not weep out of deference to Bee.

How shall I tell of the wonderful beauty

and mystery with which that brush of genius had managed to invest the ever-fascinating portraits of the five phases of Mowgli!

Although my pen staggers in the attempt, it is only a stagger of incompetency and not of unappreciativeness.

We all watched Blackman's skill in handling those large canvasses in a silence which Jimmie finally broke.

"Everybody ought to be skilled at some form of manual labour," he said. Whereat, having various and sundry recollections of Jimmie at work, I laughed.

"You needn't laugh, dear," said Mrs. Jimmie reproachfully. "Jimmie papered a room, once when we were first married, all by himself, and did it very nicely too!"

This was the first time I had ever heard of Jimmie's being handy at anything but striking matches, and I was naturally skeptical.

"Was it really well done or is that a bride's recollection?" I demanded. "Were there no mistakes?"

Jimmie and his wife glanced at each other uneasily.

"Tell her," said Jimmie. "There's no use in trying to keep anything away from a female ferret! Air the family skeleton!"

I smiled in triumph.

"Well," said Mrs. Jimmie, reluctantly. "One strip was upside down, but it was behind the door, and really, Faith, it didn't show, except when the door was shut!"

"That was the beginning of my open door policy," said Jimmie with a wink.

I relented and said no more. Jimmie's foolishness always makes a hit with me and he knows it.

I let a glorious opportunity pass.

Then, thoroughly weary, (for though I seldom can be induced to perform manual labour myself, my enthusiasm in making others work is quite exhausting), but filled with appreciation and joy, we rested and watched the fire die down and listened to the beat of the rain against the windows until the Angel happened to think of the organ, and forthwith began to play.

Alas and alack! In spite of our individual troubles and Lyddy Lathrop, we do have good times, and there are sights and sounds stored away in our memories that our own frivolity and nonsense would not dim or blur for worlds. And that last hour in the studio that night with the dancing flames now illuminating the story of Mowgli and Shere Khan as if Mowgli indeed were waving the red flower at us, and now sending black shadows over the

mysterious wild creatures of that wonder forest, while the music from the great organ went thrilling over all, is one which should be marked with a white stone.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT HAPPENED AT SHERRY'S

BEE'S toleration of Lyddy was, to those of us who know her best, something wonderful.

One evening while things were still in this unsettled state Bee came in and said abruptly:

“Wherever you and Aubrey are going to-night, you've got to take me. I left Lyddy standing in the doorway of our apartments, hurling remarks after me that if I'd stayed to listen to, I would have answered in kind and she would have had me where she wants me.”

“We are going to be very gay to-night,” I said. “Aubrey delivered his revised MS. to-day and got the rest of his advance royalty, so we are going to dine down-town and go to the theatre.”

“May I come?” asked Bee.

“Why certainly, child! You didn't think I was telling you that in order to excite your envy, did you?”

“We'll be glad to have you, Bee,” said the Angel. And at that Bee looked pleased.

"What has the old lady been up to now?" I asked cheerfully. "Come on upstairs while I dress."

"Doesn't it sound funny to say, 'come upstairs' in a New York apartment?" said Bee, following me and curling herself up on the bed while I mussed my hair going down on all fours on my closet floor to get my best hat box.

"Here, let me fix your hair for you," she said as I emerged red, hot and vexed.

"No, nobody can touch my hair without making my hairpins pull. You always stick a hairpin straight in, as though you thought my head was soft."

"Not soft, exactly," said Bee politely. "Only spongy."

"Tell about Lyddy and let me alone!" I said.

"Well, to-day I caught her reading my letters!"

"For Heaven's sake!"

"And that is why she turned on me and said things!" continued Bee.

"Look here, Bee. Why do you stand it? I wouldn't!"

"Oh, yes, you would — for all that I mean to get by it. I'll stand a whole lot more than that. Besides — "

"Well, what? Don't stop in such an irritat-

ing way just when you've got to something which sounds interesting," I cried, tumbling up my top drawer for a clean pair of gloves which were mates.

"Well, Hope Loring told me that Laflin once advised her to cultivate patience with the little things of life, and it struck me at the time that all I ever get wild about are little things. Now like Lyddy's reading my letters. That isn't much after all, is it?"

I turned and looked at her.

"Let me feel your pulse, Bee. You'll die if you keep on getting holy at this swift pace. For my part, I consider that the old cat did an awful thing. Think what she might have found!"

"Not at all," said Bee. "All the important letters are locked up!"

At that I fell over on my bureau. Bee didn't care much to see me laugh. She hates to make that kind of a hit with me.

"I might have known," I said wagging my head, "that such a holy frame of mind referred to catching Lyddy reading tailors' announcements and fingering samples!" I said.

"You are such an idiot!" observed my sister feelingly.

Just here the Angel called us, and with a

final snatch at the powder box, we hurried down.

It was a clear, starry night and we had the proud consciousness of having left none of our good clothes at home.

“Whither are we bound?” asked Bee, as Aubrey led the way to our waiting taxi, (a luxury permitted by the advance), which we hadn’t been able to afford for nearly a year.

“Where would you like to go, Bee?” asked the Angel, with a twinkle at me, reminding me of Bee’s violet ways.

“Why,” said Bee, pausing as if in uncertainty, “wouldn’t Sherry’s be satisfactory to all of us?”

“Sherry’s!” said Aubrey to the chauffeur.

“Oh, but,” said Bee, politely, as the Angel followed us in, “you didn’t ask Faith. Possibly you would have preferred to go to the Plaza or — ”

“Not at all,” I said. “I don’t care where we go.”

I thought I detected a gleam of subdued excitement in Bee’s manner as we entered Sherry’s and swept down the room, but as I saw no reason for it, I thought I must have been mistaken.

Aubrey found a good table reserved and

we seated ourselves, extremely well pleased with the world.

The table next ours had an air of expectancy which attracted our attention, and as is usual with us, when we are interested, from the time the party entered who were to sit there, we spoke but little to each other, but, within the limits of tolerable breeding — not the best, but good enough — we listened and observed them, for the women at least were there for that purpose.

They came in with an air of anticipation which showed that some of them at least were unused to dining in a public restaurant, and it presently transpired that the girl in white had never ordered a dinner and this was to be her chance.

Our table was next theirs, as I have said, and while Aubrey studied the menu, Bee and I had time to observe our neighbours.

There were six of them. One Girl in White, one Girl in Blue and a Woman in Pink. One Silly Ass, one Gibson Man and one Family Man, whose wife evidently was out of town and who plainly was invited at the last moment to fill up.

It was a party incongruous enough to be interesting from the start, and before they had been seated ten minutes, I remarked to Bee

that I was going to have the time of my life, and she nodded without speaking, she was so afraid she would miss something.

The Silly Ass at first gave no reason for his existence. I could not find an excuse for his living at all. The Gibson Man exhibited a patience born of long experience with women, while the Family Man bullied the waiter, just to show that he was master of the present situation, from which I deduced the fact that he was henpecked at home. No one stoops to bully a servant, who is not trying to get even for some sort of domestic tyranny which he is unable to remedy.

The Gibson Man was evidently host, and the Woman in Pink the chaperon. For this reason, and apparently no other, the Family Man exclaimed loudly:

“Let’s have a round of cocktails first!”

Aubrey looked at me, and murmured,

“His wife evidently doesn’t allow him to drink!”

I motioned him to silence and boldly went on observing.

The Gibson Man looked uncomfortable.

“I have never had a cocktail,” cried the Girl in White.

“Oh, then you must have one,” exclaimed

the Girl in Blue. "It makes you feel so nice and wobbly in the elbow joints!"

"Well, neither of you girls is going to feel nice and wobbly in the elbow joints while *I* am above ground!" said the Woman in Pink, decidedly. Whereat the Gibson Man drew a sigh of relief, and turned to the menu card.

"What shall we have?" he said to the Girl in White. "As this is your first experience, suppose you order the dinner?"

He was evidently not looking for trouble. He seemed simply to want to give her pleasure.

Aubrey looked at me and grinned. Then he wrote five items silently and swiftly on a little pad and handed it to our waiter, whose face lighted as he read its concise orders, and with a muttered: "Bien, monsieur!" he disappeared.

"Oh, I should simply love to!" squealed the Girl in White. Then turning to the Girl in Blue, she said: "Now, what do you like? I am going to order to suit everybody!"

"I am afraid you will find that rather difficult," said the chaperon, who seemed hungry. Then turning to the Gibson Man, she said: "Just because I won't let the girls have cocktails, there is no reason why you three men shouldn't have them!"

"Good work," said the Silly Ass. "A dry Martini for me, old chap!"

The Gibson Man whispered to the Woman in Pink, but she shook her head and motioned toward the girls.

The Family Man decided on a Manhattan cocktail, and the Gibson Man wrote them down with an order of Scotch and Soda for himself, and let the waiter go.

"Now," said the Girl in White, "how would it do to begin on oysters?"

"I hate oysters. Make it little neck clams, for me," said the Girl in Blue.

"How many want oysters?" cried the Girl in White. "Hold up your hands. Three for oysters and three for clams! Now that's all right. Will you write it down?" she begged of the Gibson Man. "You write and we'll suggest."

"Now a soup! Cream or bouillon?"

"I like thick soups best, but they do take away your appetite!" said the chaperon. "How about a chicken broth in cups?"

"Or a Petite Marmite?" said the Silly Ass.

"Or a green turtle?" said the Family Man.

"I believe I'll change my order of oysters to clams!" cried the Girl in White, suddenly. The Gibson Man gravely made the change.

"Now about soup?" he said tentatively.

The waiter reappeared with the cocktails, and the Family Man proposed the health of the ladies.

"To you!" murmured the Silly Ass to the Woman in Pink. She looked at the Gibson Man and they both smiled.

"About the soup?" suggested the Family Man.

"Would green turtle suit everybody?" asked the chaperon. It had made her a little nervous to see that we had finished our oysters and were eating our fish.

After a little demur, they decided on three for green turtle and three for chicken broth in cups.

"Now fish!" cried the Girl in White. "Is anybody going to deny me a broiled lobster?"

"A broiled lobster as a fish course!" cried the chaperon. "My dear, think a moment!"

"I *do* think! I *am* thinking! I never do anything *but* think what I want to eat in a restaurant, and I never can get anybody to join me in a lobster! Sometimes they won't even let me order one!"

"Well, you are going to have one right now," said the Gibson Man, earnestly. "And I'll join you, just to show that I approve your taste!"

The girl's face brightened and the chaperon looked appreciatively at the Gibson Man.

"I think that was lovely of him," I murmured to Aubrey, but Aubrey only smiled as he handed me the sauce tartare. But Bee, for some inexplicable reason, blushed.

"How would broiled Spanish mackerel do?" suggested the Family Man.

"I adore planked shad — all but the bones," said the Woman in Pink. "But I'll go in for the mackerel if the girls want it."

It was finally decided to order bluefish.

The waiter stood on the other foot.

"Any wine, sir?" he suggested deferentially. "I might be ordering it, sir."

"May they have champagne?" asked the Gibson Man in a low tone. As the Woman in Pink hesitated, he murmured, "Why deny yourself everything, just because you are the chaperon?"

At this she weakened and he wrote down a champagne. The waiter took on a new lease of life as he trotted away to fill the order.

"What do girls like for meat?" asked the Family Man, an eagerness for food beginning to glitter in his eye. Aubrey glanced at him sympathetically as our waiter deftly slipped portions of peas to keep company with the broiled chicken on our plates.

"Oh, are rice birds in season?" exclaimed the Girl in Blue.

"Rice birds?" exclaimed the Family Man involuntarily.

"I am afraid they are not in season," said the Gibson Man evenly. "How would quail do or snipe?"

"Could I have roast beef?" demanded the Family Man.

"We might all have it after the birds," suggested the Woman in Pink.

That remark alone showed that she was married. Such tact in catering to a man's appetite does not go, as a rule, with the spinster estate.

"Quail, then," decided the Girl in White, "and instead of roast beef for me, chicken in those queer things — you know — all stewed up with an odd tasting sauce and cooked in a queer sort of bowl — what do you call 'em?"

"Chicken en casserole," translated the chaperon.

The Gibson Man wrote patiently and the waiter suggested serving the champagne.

The Gibson Man looked up inquiringly, and moved by the thirsty appeal in the eyes of the two men, the Woman in Pink said:

"Yes, do let him!" and then bit her lip to keep from laughing. "But first send him

along with as much of the order as has been decided on, for Heaven's sake!" she added. The waiter was accordingly dispatched. The lines of anguish smoothed a trifle from his brow, and he started on a trot.

The Girl in White had been studying her menu. Suddenly she put out her hand.

"Oh, wait! Has he gone? Call him back! I want to change my order. I see something here that I would like much better than quail — I —"

The chaperon reared her crest.

"It's too late now, dear!" she said evenly. "Keep that for another time. I'll bring you here some day for luncheon and then we'll come early and take simply hours to decide!"

"Oh, you love!" cried the Girl in White, reaching out and pressing her hand ecstatically.

The waiter came hurrying back with the oysters and clams. He was plainly nervous. It was already half past eight and we were having our salad.

"Take those clams away!" cried the Family Man rudely. "I said oysters. Can't you remember a little thing like that? You've had time enough to learn the order by heart!"

"I beg pardon," said the unfortunate menial humbly.

The man fairly gobbled his oysters.

"How disgusting of him!" I murmured to Aubrey.

"Not in the least," he answered me. "The fellow may be uncouth, but he has my sympathy. He had his cocktail exactly fifty minutes ago and they have been talking food ever since. At present I am wracked with anxiety to know whether they will decide on hot or cold artichokes, or whether it will be asparagus. Listen!"

We listened. We couldn't help it. This was better than a one-act play and we didn't care if we missed the curtain raiser.

"Would you like cheese with your salad, or after the sweets?" asked the Gibson Man, and his tone was as courteous as it had been when they began to order — just an hour before.

"I'd like it after," said the Girl in White.

"And you?" he asked the men.

"With!" snapped the Family Man. "May that fool bring the soup?"

At a sign the waiter sprang forward. The girls were still toying with their clams.

"Oh, wait a minute! Don't hurry us!" cried the Girl in Blue. "Aren't these clams perfect darlings!"

"I wish I were a clam!" sighed the Silly Ass.

"So do I!" growled the Family Man.
"I'd eat one your size with pleasure!"

"Oh, I hope you aren't as hungry as that!" cried the Girl in White. "Have I been slow in ordering? You see I have had no experience. And it has been such fun!"

"You have not been too slow!" lied the Gibson Man nobly. "Just tell me what sort of an ice you like, and then we are through with this part."

"Oh, anything very sweet and rich and done up in cute little paper boxes!" cried the Girl in Blue.

For the first time the Gibson Man looked helpless. He shot a glance of appeal at the waiter, who bent and murmured in his ear.

"Nesselrode pudding might please her taste, sir!"

"Hold your tongue!" cried the Family Man. "Don't suggest a thing until your help is asked. The officiousness of some of these waiters is insufferable!"

"I wished him to translate," said the Gibson Man coldly. The Woman in Pink sent the Family Man as settling a glance as if she had been his wife. Evidently he understood the quality of it, for he shrank visibly.

Aubrey carefully took the sugar from his

coffee cup before the waiter could pour his coffee.

"That woman is masterly in her management of men," he observed to me. "I like her generalship."

"Oh, couldn't I have a Pêche Melba instead of a nesselrode pudding?" asked the Girl in White. "My sister had one once and she said it was the best thing she ever tasted. She told me to be sure to try one the very first chance I got. May I?"

"Most certainly. And now with coffee that will do!"

The Gibson Man handed the waiter the pad and leaned back in his chair. He managed to look at his watch. It was ten minutes to nine and the waiter was bringing us our bill.

The Woman in Pink touched the Gibson Man's arm with her fan.

"I think it was very nice of you," she said. "It is so difficult to please everybody, but you seem to have achieved it."

His face lighted under her words.

"Thank you," he said. "I hope I have succeeded."

We rose to go, and the last thing we heard as we passed out was the voice of the Girl in White:

"Oh, do call the waiter back! I've seen

something here I'd so much rather have than — ”

As we passed their table, I was rendered speechless by seeing Aubrey bow to the Gibson Man, and as I stepped off of Bee's train, after she had shot me a look such as I hope she used to give James, I saw that it was Laflin Van Tassel.

Then the secret of Bee's silence and blush was out.

“ Did you know who it was all the time? ” I whispered.

“ Of course. Didn't you see Aubrey bow? ”

“ No, I didn't. I don't know what I could have been about, ” I said regretfully.

“ You were looking at the menu, dear, ” said the Angel. “ He waited as long as he could to bow to you, but finally gave it up. He sat with his back to you. ”

“ I never should have known him, ” I declared. “ He is as handsome as the Hermes! ”

Bee was walking at my side in an unusual silence. Aubrey was smiling.

“ By the way, Bee, how is Hope? ” he said suddenly.

“ She is very well and terribly busy with the last of her trousseau. ”

Aubrey managed to whisper to me.

“ Bee must have learned from Hope that

Laflin was dining here to-night. Don't start! She'll see you!"

"I wonder who that woman with him is," said Bee.

I looked at her, but she seemed unaware that her observation was at all illuminating. Suddenly she looked up at me:

"Do you see now what he means by 'patience with the little things of life?'" said Bee. "Weren't those girls enough to drive any sensible man insane?"

"Do you see him often?" I asked irrelevantly.

She looked at me in surprise.

"I don't know him at all," she said with a note of regret in her voice I was not slow to observe. It seemed strange to know that Bee wanted anything she couldn't get.

"I had only seen his photograph," she added. "They are all very proud of him."

I at once began to wonder if we couldn't ask him on one of our Happy Family excursions. If not, I knew what I could do. Ask him to dinner!

But Bee! To think of it.

Well, as usual, she had selected her victim with unerring judgment.

I looked at her critically and was glad that she had at least got as far as mauve.

CHAPTER VII

BOB'S ENGAGEMENT

OUR apartment backs up to a theatrical boarding house and from our windows we can see literally into the lives of that busy hive of people, everyone of whom "does something."

We can hear certain things also. There is a pathetic little hunchback on the third floor east who plays the 'cello so that he makes me shiver with joy. Into the low, vibrating tones of that instrument he pours out all his emotions, all that he longs for, all that he has missed in life through his infirmity, all that he has hoped to achieve. We know more of that man's inner life than he dreams. He loves the sound of our big organ too, for whenever the windows are open on mild evenings, he comes and listens.

Then there is the Nice Girl on the fourth floor. I call her the nice girl, although she is so pretty she might well be called a beauty, because everything she does is so self-respecting yet so pathetic. We can look down into

her room but can only see her when she comes close to the windows.

She must be bitterly poor, for sometimes she will not go down to her meals for a day or two at a time. She must creep out after dark and buy bread and milk and the like, because we can see her heating things in a tin cup over the gas jet by the window, and her bottle of milk stands out on the ledge every day.

Then she has regular laundry days when on a line strung across her room she hangs up things to dry, and she irons her handkerchiefs by pasting them on the window panes while they are wet.

I mention these things, not because they are interesting in themselves, but because they become so, when done by a girl so pretty and graceful and dainty as my nice girl seems. She folds everything with such neatness. She brushes her skirts and her long lovely hair with equal regularity and care. She goes down into the tiny backyard with a container of gasoline and washes her white serge things and re-trims her two hats until you would think she had six, and every day she emerges with such an air of freshness that if we couldn't see all these things, we would imagine her to be in the flower of prosperity.

Now and then we meet her at the entrance

to the Subway, and I am always looking for an opportunity to speak to her, because I am anxious to know her well enough to ask her to dinner. She would never know that our wish for her society was largely augmented by the sight of the wretched little tin cups held over the gas jet.

“ If only I could rig up a little pulley from our window to hers,” I said to Aubrey, “ how sweet it would be to pack a small basket with tiny dabs of the nice things left over, which are always too good to throw away and send it whizzing down to her window.”

“ You’ve always regretted that we didn’t have a cat to eat up the left overs,” said Aubrey. “ You hate to waste food.”

“ It isn’t that,” I said wistfully. “ I do really feel as if it would be so nice to help a sweet, high spirited girl like that. I tell you, Aubrey, New York has thousands of girls in it, who are starving along just as this girl is, yet who never complain. Did you ever think of it?”

“ Many a time. And I respect them for their reticence. They all have hard luck stories, but they never tell them.”

“ Hard luck stories are most impressive when they are not told, I have observed,” I said, and Aubrey nodded.

"She ought to marry a rich man, if things went right in this world — which they never do, except in your stories," I added.

We had been in our apartment over a month, but as yet Bob Mygatt had not been to see either us or it. We had several times been out with him in Jimmie's motor, but in some way he had been prevented from coming to us, so that when the Angel said presently he had to work on his play to-night, but that Bob had said he was coming up, I was both surprised and pleased, for I was anxious to hear the details of his engagement, and something told me that this was to be my opportunity.

And so it proved, for no sooner had Aubrey apologized and gone into Munson's empty studio to work, than Bob leaned his elbows on his knees, dropped his face in his hands and said:

"Well, Highness, I want to tell you the whole thing and get your advice!"

"I am at your service, Bob, and very much interested, as you must know," I answered.

"I do know," he returned gratefully, raising his head and looking at me with those eyes of his, in a way that made me obliged instantly to recall the fact that he always looked

at Lyddy in the same way, as well as that I was married.

“ Well, — if you knew her you would understand the whole thing without a word. I’ve loved her for two years and I believe she loves me, but — ”

“ Get to the point, Bob! How can I understand anything when you wander on like that. Take for granted that I know you are dead in love with each other and get on, do! ”

Bob grinned.

“ You are a tonic, ladybird,” he said. Oh, how wild it does make Aubrey and Jimmie to hear Bob call any of us those names! But you can no more prevent Bob’s doing it than you can prevent the wind from blowing. They belong to his Irish tongue as though they had grown there.

“ Well! Ava, as I told you, is a walking conscience. She has Ideals. She does Right. And she holds no converse with Wrong. As you know, she has a voice like a nightingale, but she can no more act than a milking stool, and it shows how much I love her when I tell you that, knowing she might ruin my piece, I still stipulated that she should sing the part of Allie Gayter, when I signed the contract.”

He paused for my applause and I gave it.

“ That was fine of you, Bob,” I said, and he

beamed. "But I really don't see how you could very well have done any less!"

He looked surprised and a trifle dashed.

"Because marriage is a partnership and you have got to do things like that all your life. One can't soar off and leave the other to grovel. The soarer must haul the laggard along."

"True!" he said and sighed. It apparently was new to this man, whom women had always spoiled, to do generous and unselfish things, and it was still more disquieting to realize that he must continue to do them and to see them taken as a matter of course.

"Well, she learned the part and came on to New York last month to rehearse. She lives just back of you in the—"

"Is she tall and willowy, with blue eyes and light brown hair, and does she live in a back room on the fourth floor?" I cried with pardonable excitement.

Bob looked up in surprise.

"Why, of course. You can see right down into her windows, can't you?" he said. "Let's look."

We flew to the big studio window, opened the door of it and leaned out. I felt no fear of catching her in an embarrassing *négligée* because, from the precautions she always took,

I knew that she was aware of the outlook from the five upper floors of our big building.

"Listen!" he said quickly. "She is singing!"

Then there rose on the still, cool night the sounds of the Intermezzo from the Cavaleria Rusticana played on the 'cello of the little hunchback, and Ava was singing the Ave Maria to it, in a voice of such sweetness and purity that I caught my breath in delighted surprise.

We listened until the end came and then hopefully waited for more, but evidently someone else below us was listening also, for a foolish hand clapping arose and then came the sound of a window closing.

Bob turned away.

"That ends it. She will sing no more. Wouldn't you think any fool would know better than to applaud music like that, expecting to get more? Now if it had been rag time and they had clapped, they would have had another. But Ava singing that Ave Maria! Who was that playing?"

"It was a poor, pathetic looking little hunchback, whose room is just under hers," I replied.

"I know. I've heard her rave about him.

She says his music gets into her heart. I'm glad he is a hunchback!"

"Bob!" I expostulated.

"You know what I mean! I mean I'm glad she couldn't possibly fall in love with him."

"She could if she wanted to," I said cruelly. "He is not objectionable to look at and his face is perfectly beautiful."

"Ava likes tall men," said Bob straightening himself.

"I — I wish you would bring her to see me," I said, diffidently, not wishing to tell Bob of the poverty which she evidently had concealed from him.

"I don't know whether I have any influence with her now," he said gloomily.

"Well," I said patiently, "if you would ever get on with your story, I might know what you are talking about."

"It's not much when all told. Simply that the manager wanted me to introduce more lyrics into my piece — you know *The Alligator Pear Tree* is one of these farce comedy things with songs interpolated. Well, I couldn't seem to suit them with anything of my own, so I had some songs sent in from aspiring young authors, and two of them were rotten in themselves, but they gave me just

the idea I wanted. So I sent the songs back and wrote some new lyrics, with different metre and rhymes and all that, so that it was practically my stuff, and ran them in. The manager liked them and everything went all right till Ava looked them over. Then she refused to sing them. She knew I had sent back the songs and she kicked up a sort of a fuss about that — got kind o' maudlin over the disappointment it would be to the author to see 'em come home to roost. But when she found that I had used the same idea, although she realized that it was in a different form, there was simply the devil to pay. You'd have thought that she had discovered that I had slain my aged grandmother and walled up her remains. She said things until I got mad and left the rehearsal."

"Did she ask you to take them out?"

"No. She asked me to pay the other fellow for the use of his brains!"

"Then what did she do when you refused?"

"She resigned her part. Actually gave up for a scruple, the thing she has wanted to do all her life!"

I knew now why she was cooking things over her gas jet.

"Well, what are you going to do?" I asked.

"I don't know. You tell me!"

"I can't advise you until I know which you care most to keep — your love or your pride."

"I want the girl. I want my Ava!"

"Then buy those songs and write her that you have paid for them. Can she still have the part if she should want it?"

"Yes, I think so. The rehearsals have been awfully interrupted and delayed. And they don't find it easy to get anyone with the peculiar high voice that some of the songs need. You see I wrote them especially to exploit her voice."

"Then act at once and see what comes of it."

"Is that your advice? Can't you think of any other way?"

"No, and it will be good for you, Bobbie, to have to choke down just that unpalatable piece of humble pie. You know you are pretty badly spoiled and you wear a haughty crest."

"Can't you think of anything else? Anything quite different?"

"Yes, one thing radically different," I said.

"What is it?" he said brightening.

"Marry Lyddy!" I cried, laughing. "Why, Bob, you are actually blushing! How funny!"

"I'll think over your advice," he said, rising and holding out his hand.

"My last?"

"No, your first. Don't disturb the old man. Tell him I said 'Good luck' to him. I hope his play will be a success!"

And with that he was gone.

Two days later I was surprised by a call from the nice girl.

"You won't think it strange, my coming this way, will you?" she said. And as I hastily reassured her I saw that she was prettier than ever at close range.

"Not at all. I've often wanted to write you!" I said smiling.

"Why, can you see me too?" she said going toward the window.

"Can you see us?" I cried following her.

"Oh, I know quite a good deal about you!" she said, laughing. "You won't let your husband smoke his pipe in your apartment. He smokes out of the Munsons' bathroom window!"

"When he smokes a vile pipe, he does," I said firmly. "Now you will stay to lunch with me so that we can have a good talk, won't you?"

As we reached the window we both looked out. Her poor little gas-jet was in plain sight

with the tin cup still standing on its little iron ring. Her face flushed crimson and she caught her lip between her teeth.

"Thank you, but I have just had my lunch," she said proudly. But a quick glance showed a quivering chin.

I felt the blood go prickly in my veins, for it was barely twelve o'clock. But she turned away, and as we sat down I could see that she had conquered her feeling of chagrin and was herself again.

"I have often wanted to know you, even before I knew who you were," she began. "Then when a note came from Bob, saying that you wanted him to bring me to call, I knew that he had been here and consulted you about our affairs and that he was acting under orders."

"Oh, no!" I cried. "I only suggested."

"What did you suggest?"

"I suggested that he marry another woman!"

She laughed and flushed a little, delicately.

"And did that have the desired effect?" she asked.

"Its flash lighted his pathway for a moment — showed him where to step, so to speak," I answered.

She mused a moment in silence.

"I knew you could understand," she said. "And as I couldn't — I simply couldn't talk to Bob or to you before him, I decided to come and see you alone."

As she evidently expected no response, I made none, and presently she said abruptly,

"What do you think of Bob?"

"Just about what you think, only in a lesser degree. I am not in love with him, but I recognize his fascination and his faults."

"Exactly. And his faults are terrible. But after all, I cannot forget — the rest. He fascinates me with his odd, funny ways and his frank, open love making until I feel as if — "

"I know. You feel as if you could almost follow him through the streets like a dog! It's odd how such no-account chaps can be so hypnotic!" I exclaimed.

She laughed delightedly.

"You do understand him!" she cried. "Now I have no sense of humour, Bob says, yet I don't agree with him on that point, for when he sits on the floor at my side and looks up at me and — and says things, I love him with all my heart, yet I feel the ridiculousness of his calling me 'lady bird' and 'highness' and 'white princess' and words that he saves for me alone. Now isn't that having a sense of humour?"

I simply stared at her a moment. Then I said vaguely :

“ Er — what? What did you say? ”

“ I asked you if that didn’t prove that I had a sense of humour? Aren’t you listening to me? ”

“ Have you known Bob Mygatt long? ” I asked.

“ Three or four years, off and on, ” she answered.

“ In that time have you seen him much in the company of others? ”

“ No, mostly alone. Then I have had — well, I think I must have a ton of letters from him. He writes as easily as he talks. Why do you ask? ”

“ Because — well, because, he — he carries on with others, you know — not seriously — but — ”

“ Oh, I know! You should see him make love to my mother. She is large and fat, yet Bob sits at her feet and traces resemblances to me in her appearance — yet everybody says I look like father’s family — until she laughs herself red in the face. And, much to her discomfiture, he propels himself all over the room in a sitting posture, clasping his knees if he moves. And if she says to him with great severity: ‘ Mr. Mygatt, did your mother never

teach you manners?" he always says earnestly: "No, Mrs. Corliss, she left all that to you!" Then of course it's all over and after that she can't do anything. Secretly she adores him."

"I began to wish the Nice Girl hadn't called.

"Well, about this trouble between you," I said, hastily changing the subject. "How does it stand now?"

"Practically just where it stood before. We are still engaged, but his offering to pay poor Mr. Shupe for those lyrics isn't the trouble. It's because after seeing the way he acted about it, how can I be sure that the rest of The Alligator Pear Tree is his? Do you know, I have never put it into words before, and I hate to now, but Bob Mygatt actually has no conscience!"

"Do you know what *I* think is the matter with him?" I said.

"No, what?"

"I believe that he actually doesn't know right from wrong when he sees them!"

Ava Corliss leaned back in her chair and her hands fell at her sides totally relaxed.

"That is the truth!" she cried. "That explains everything about him that has ever puzzled me. Yes, that is it. It isn't that he is consciously bad. He simply doesn't know."

She half way closed her eyes and thought seriously for a moment. Then she said:

"That point of view alters everything. I think I see my duty now."

"Do you always do your duty?" I asked with awe. Duty to me was always the one thing I exercised every faculty to get out of doing.

"Oh, yes," she said, with an exalted look. "Don't you?"

"Er—oh, yes. Yes, of course," I said, hastily. I remembered just in time that Bob said she had no sense of humour. I began to see why he said so. Her manner after she spoke of duty and the peculiar look in her eyes indicated a faint trace of the fanatic. I remembered, too, what Bob said about her scruples.

When luncheon was announced, I begged her again to join me, but she refused with lifted head, and hastily said good-bye. I came back after showing her out, pondering over her unusual beauty and the strangeness of her engagement to Bob Mygatt.

The next bulletin came from Bob in the shape of a note.

"Many thanks for your advice, dearest and best of ladybirds," he wrote. "Everything has come out O. K. I told her I had paid for

those lyrics and the lie went down her pretty white throat like an ice cream soda on a hot day. But God keep her from ever meeting Shupe. Even if we were married, I believe she'd leave me if she ever found out. Ava is still to sing the rôle of Allie Gayter and we open in New Haven on the 12th. Can't you all make up a party and come up for the première? With dearest love, as ever, Bob."

"P. S. Of course you know, dear heart of ice, that I am not naturally a villain. I am only drawn into sin by my poverty. I am over ears in debt and couldn't spare a sou for Shupe to save my immortal soul from the devil's frying. So keep my sekert! Bobbie."

I will own that by this time I was thoroughly startled. Bob liked me, I was sure. I was equally sure that he valued my good opinion. Why, then, should he confess to me that he had deliberately lied to the woman he loved, unless he thought it was no harm and was sure I would agree with him? Didn't this prove that Bob didn't know right from wrong?

CHAPTER VIII

NAPOLEONIC STRATEGY

IN my fond but foolish intention of giving Bee's affairs a lift by arranging for her to meet the man she had decided to marry, I reckoned without my host. I had forgotten how competent my sister was at managing her own affairs. But I soon had my attention called to the fact by a series of events, small in themselves, yet significant when viewed in their proper sequence and perspective.

The first was the assiduity with which Bee cultivated Hope Loring's friendship, instead of Sallie Fitzhugh's, who was of her own kind, while the tomboy Hope was decidedly out of my sister's orbit.

Laflin was Hope's favourite cousin, and those two, with Hope's brother Jermyn were all crazy over athletics, speedy motors and all the forms of active sports which Bee secretly disdained. Therefore, I was once more forced to a reluctant admiration when I discovered that Bee had consulted Mr. Loring, Hope's father, about her affairs, for I at once sus-

pected that she intended to reach Laflin through his interest in his profession. Just how I did not see. But I knew that I should soon discover.

The next thing I knew we were all invited to Coolmeath to a polo match on the Lorings' private polo grounds.

Coolmeath was on the Hudson in the Pocantico Hills, and had been repurchased by Mr. Loring very advantageously for Hope, with her own money made so miraculously during her mysterious illness.

Although it stood in Hope's name, as was usual with this devoted family, they were all there, with Mrs. Loring at the head of the house, just as she used to be when Coolmeath was theirs before their loss of fortune.

It was vaguely understood that Hope and Cedric Hamilton would take it over when they were married, but nobody who knew Hope, placed much faith in the rumour, for Hope knew as much about housekeeping as a Maltese kitten, whereas she was an authority on polo and football and all the heroic accomplishments that a gentleman like herself should practise.

Jimmie took Bee, the Angel, Mrs. Jimmie and myself in his motor. Lyddy had an engagement with Bob, so miraculously timed as

almost to suggest the hand of Providence or Bee, so we did not have to bother with her.

When we arrived, we found the Fitzhughs, the Lorings, including Jermyn and his present inamorata, Miss Cynthia Willing, Stony Stewart and his wife and a number of young people, who carried themselves with so much importance we felt that we ought to know them, and were quite humiliated at being obliged to be introduced.

Laflin Van Tassel had not yet arrived, but was expected, and was bringing with him Mrs. Pakenham and Miss Amy Levering.

These names told me nothing, but I saw by the way Bee lifted her head and allowed the green in her eyes to supplant the gray, that she knew. I managed to ask her:

“The chaperon at his dinner at Sherry’s,” she answered cautiously, without moving her lips, and the one we called ‘the Girl in White.’”

“The one who did the ordering?” I whispered.

She nodded her head invisibly.

“I must tell Aubrey. He is still wondering what she wanted to change that last order to!”

Bee smiled. Then reluctantly she allowed herself to be removed to the polo field.

The game was delightful. Hope played,

looking like a pretty boy in her linen divided skirt and her smart brown boots, and Cedric Hamilton and Jermyn and Stony Stewart, all the boys in fact, were worshipful as ever, and even more devoted and tender because of her wretched illness and her plucky recovery.

I saw Laflin when he came, but there was no opportunity to introduce his party to Bee.

When the game was over and we all went back to the pergola and the marquee for refreshments, Sallie Fitzhugh happened to say that they were thinking of building, and asked Mrs. Jimmie what her idea of a summer cottage was.

As Laflin and Miss Levering had not yet arrived from the polo grounds, there was nothing for Bee to do but listen and join in the discussion, which at first sounded decidedly desultory, because Bee was permitting her attention to wander.

“Yes,” I heard my sister say, “I think you are quite right, Sallie. Go by all means to a spot which has neighbours. What do you want to pioneer for? Why wade in mud while roads are being built? Why wait for lights and telephones to be installed, unless you can’t afford to go where luxuries of this sort are already put in? You, fortunately, can afford — anything!”

"But Greenacre is very conventional — my husband calls it smug."

"But it is also distinctly fashionable," said Bee. "You are sure of your neighbours. The keynote of a proper mode of living has already been struck and the others have had the good taste to chime in."

"I will admit," said Sallie, "that conventionality pleases me just as well as it does you, Bee. But lately — since we —"

"Since you have been seeing so much of the Jimmies," said Bee, with faint scorn, "you have felt ambitious along their lines, have you? I know how it feels. It infects me at times. But I always cross my fingers when I feel the first symptoms. Take my advice, Sallie. Don't you try to be original. You'd only end in being queer."

"I believe you are right," said Sallie, smiling, "but I wish you would convert Laflin to your point of view. He wants me to build in a tree or under ground, with subterranean passages and tunnels and hanging gardens — anything in the world to be different from everybody else. The only trouble would be to find a spot original enough for his originality."

It is not often that my sister, Mrs. Lathrop, sets a trap, baits it, then deliberately walks into it and hears it snap on her own little paw,

but that is exactly what she had been doing in the last quarter of an hour.

The expression on her face was worth looking at. She made no reply, but I saw by her rapidly changing countenance, that she was where it would require some of her finest mental work to extricate herself without showing where the trap had nipped her.

"Here they come," said Sallie. "Laflin and Amy, absorbed as usual."

She beckoned to the slowly strolling couple, who quickened their pace and joined us in the pergola.

The pergola to my mind was the loveliest spot in all Coolmeath. It was covered with climbing roses and honeysuckle, and, except for the bees, who evidently were as partial to its cloying sweetness as I was, it was ideal in its loveliness.

Personally, however, I am on terms of the most distant politeness with bees, and except for the time when Jimmie's bulldog chased my cat and then carelessly sat down on a bee to cool off, I have never been in sympathy with bees' method of drawing attention to themselves.

That one time, however, justified their existence. The bee, I remember, did not go with the dog as he set off on his second heat, which

was just as well, for at the rate he was travelling when he disappeared over the hedge, even the weight of a bee would have been a distinct handicap.

I mention the occurrence at this point, because as Laflin and Amy Levering entered the pergola, a bee flew into her hair and there was some little confusion before Laflin got it out, so that their introduction was very informal, for we were all talking at once, and it was some moments before Sallie brought the conversation back to the building of cottages, which she did by saying:

“I am sorry to say that we are all against you, Laflin, in your suggestion to branch out and build in an unusual way.”

“I am not surprised,” said Laflin, with the young architect’s usual weariness in encountering conventions, “although I did hope — ”

“You did hope that our being relatives, you could bamboozle us,” said Norman Fitzhugh, “into being — into being — ”

“The yellow dog for you to try your incipient architectural madness on,” said Jimmie. “But they won’t — any more than I would! Experiments cost money, son!”

“I know! I know!” said Laflin. “It’s the same old story. I can get all the work I want, on planning hideously commonplace

houses for people with no imagination, on grounds which are flat and uninteresting. All that most of my clients seem to care for is a strip of beach or golf links. They haven't a soul for the artistic or the odd or the surprises which an imaginative mind can create out of even one acre of land full of rocks and — ”

“ What Laflin would like,” said Hope, “ would be for someone to let him build a house on top of a telegraph pole, to be reached by an escalator or an airship!”

“ No!” cried Jermyn, “ that wouldn't be sufficiently artistic. He wants to build a castle on a rock in mid ocean, to be reached by all sailing craft and ocean liners. It could be rigged out with wireless, and supplies could be fetched by balloons.”

“ Nonsense!” said Laflin. “ You make me out a crazy fool! I hope Miss Levering does not believe you!”

The young man, who was handsome beyond most men, turned and looked at the dainty creature at his side, and I heard Bee's invisible plumage rustle.

“ I wonder,” said my sister slowly, “ how much of this — ” she paused and looked directly at Laflin and Amy Levering, “ nonsense I am to believe! I wonder if I have really found at last — ” (Her delicate emphasis

would seem to indicate that she had searched with, oh, such weariness! over half the world and for many a long and tee-jous year!) "an architect with sufficient soul and imagination to appreciate the possibilities of a piece of property so odd and artistic that I have hitherto been actually afraid to spoil things by planning to utilize its odd beauty instead of subduing it by a modern and conventional building!"

No less than ten pairs of bewildered eyes were fastened upon my sister as she gracefully delivered this amazing speech. Sallie and Norman Fitzhugh in surprise; Jimmie and I in silent delight, but poor Laflin Van Tassel in the fascinated disbelief of one who fears his ears are deceiving him. He knew Bee's reputation for being a widow with abundant means, and in the ardour of his professional zeal, he visibly detached himself from the girl at his side and edged nearer to my sister.

"The main feature of the property," Bee went on, "is a huge gray rock, which juts out into the Sound. I want the house built on that. There is a sheer drop of two hundred feet to the sea below. On one side, some straight pines grow on the slope below, so that a veranda built there would let those trees up

through its floor. On the land side, the ground is as flat as my hand, so that I could have a garden full of old fashioned flowers.” (I stole a look at Aubrey just here, remembering Bee’s education from Lady Mary and Sir Wemyss Lombard at Peach Orchard, and the Angel winked at me solemnly.) “But, unless, Mr. Van Tassel, you could be in sympathy with such an idea, I fear my dream will never be realized.”

“My dear Mrs.—er—”

“Lathrop,” said Bee, gently, but secretly wild because he had not remembered her name.

“Pardon me! Mrs. Lathrop,” stammered the young architect. “If you would honour me by entrusting such a glorious opportunity to me, I would be—I would enjoy simply drawing up the plans of such a place, whether you ever accepted them or not.”

“Oh, but,” said Bee, smiling at him slowly, “if you drew them up, as I am sure you could, from all I have heard to-day, I would build and count myself fortunate indeed to secure such an architect.”

“You just bet she would,” murmured Jimmie in my ear. “Isn’t Bee a wonder! Good old Bee!”

“How large is the place?” asked Laflin,

eagerly. In his preoccupation he turned a little more from Amy Levering. But my sister is never rude unless she wishes to put some upstart in his or her place, so she turned gracefully to the girl and said:

“I’m afraid all this is rather a bore to the young people, isn’t it, Miss Levering?”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed the girl, smiling responsively. “I am always interested in anything which tends to make my own country as beautiful as the places abroad.”

Bee moved slightly and Amy came and sat beside her, whereat Laflin frankly planted himself in front of the two and plunged into the subject afresh.

“I’m sure Miss Levering means what she says,” said Laflin eagerly. “She is very sincere.” He turned and smiled at the girl in a way which was not lost upon Bee. “How many acres are in your property, Mrs. —”

“I am not sure,” said Bee vaguely, “nor could I give you its exact location. I only know that it is miles from a single habitation. There one could be absolutely alone with nature. And such nature! But if you are really interested — if you think you would care to investigate and see if I have overestimated its possibilities, why, I will look the matter up and arrange —”

"Arrange for me to go with you some day and see it? Could you do that, Mrs. — er — "

"Lathrop!" prompted Bee with an expression in her eyes which would have warned anybody but a fool or a man that his interest in the proposition over the subject of the lady was not exactly making a hit with her.

"We might go in my motor," pursued Laflin. "You say the rock juts out into the sea? You could have two distinct effects — one by sea and one by land. I think — " his eyes took on a faraway look and for a moment we all knew that we were forgotten.

But Bee was clever enough to be distinctly pleased. It was sufficient triumph for her so to have aroused his professional interest. She felt that the personal would come later.

As she glanced at me, she gave me a look which meant :

"Crude material, but capable of being moulded. Decidedly worth while."

This message was so distinct that I absent-mindedly answered aloud.

"So it is!"

At which she frowned in reproof.

I looked to see if Miss Levering seemed to object to the way things had gone, but she was frankly enjoying a little talk with Hope and Cedric Hamilton, who were sitting just be-

yond and feeding her with strawberries, grown on the Coolmeath estate, and too delicious for mere words to describe.

I was glad to see by her sincerity that Miss Levering did not resent her cavalier's present defection, nor the possible desertion it portended. Evidently, thought I, the devotion, as yet, is entirely on his side.

This idea must also have been in Bee's mind, because I saw her studying the every move and glance of the young people.

I will say this for my sister. She might condescend to shift emotional scenery or deflect mental currents, but she is no robber — "Bee is no body-snatcher" was the way Jimmie agreed with me, when I tried to get the idea delicately into his ribald mind. She wouldn't have hurt Amy Levering's feelings for the world. Evidently, however, she came to the same conclusion that I did, for she proceeded to retire — mentally, of course, further and further from the company and more and more into her captivating personality, and for each step she receded, Laflin took one in advance, until, when the company broke up, they seemed to be doing nicely, thanks.

It was only Sallie Fitzhugh who allowed herself a sly dig at Bee, for her sudden change of front.

"I am a little surprised at you, Bee. I understood you to say that for me to try to be original would only end in my being queer. Doesn't that remark also apply to you?"

Bee smiled, but I, who knew her, realized that she was uncomfortable. Still she had counted the cost before she cast her die. She had been suddenly called upon to choose between going flatly back on a statement of opinion which we all knew was sincere, and the unexpected opportunity of nailing Laflin Van Tassel's millionaire attention by one bold stroke, which might sacrifice the good opinion of a dozen friends, but which kept to the main issue and could scarcely fail to make good.

Trust our Bee to know her way about. She chose, as usual, unerringly. Friends were very well in their way, but one doesn't every day find a young and handsome millionaire of excellent family, roaming over the plains, simply waiting to be roped, tied and branded. So the friends who were sacrificed, were witness to the branding, and dispersed, entertaining high hopes of also seeing the widow "gentle" her new property in the most approved plains fashion.

"Perhaps," said Norman Fitzhugh slyly, "Mrs. Lathrop forgot to cross her fingers this time!"

There was nothing malicious in these remarks, for both Norman and Sallie were of Bee's kind and played the game according to the same rules, but I know now, that they then and there tacitly accepted Bee as a cousin, and from that moment realized that Laflin Van Tassel's fate was sealed. In fact, Laflin became engaged to my sister in that very hour, although he himself did not know it then. Bee saved the knowledge to surprise him with.

From Bee's preoccupation on the way home, I knew something was bearing unusually hard upon her mind, so I left her to wrestle with her problem alone, as I knew she wished, certain that she would tell me when she got ready or when she had a use for my help.

And thus it turned out, for the next time I went to see her, I saw by her determined aspect that her plans were formed and I suspected that I had arrived upon the eve of battle.

"Will you kindly tell me," I said with a fine sarcasm which was quite wasted upon her, as most family sarcasm is, "where this wonderful piece of property is situated? Likewise where you expect to get the money to build your wonder-house with? Also what under the shining sun you would do with such a place if you had it — you, whose idea of a

suitable site for a country place, sufficiently isolated to suit your social and sociable needs, is a corner similar to those at 42nd Street and Broadway?"

"Did you know," was Bee's lucid and irrelevant reply to these spirited questions, "that Bob has got a job with Sysonby and Arsenal?"

"No, I didn't. Who are they? And what's that got to do with my impassioned remarks?"

Bee lifted her head and listened. A triple knock sounded at her door.

"That's Lyddy!" she whispered. "Go in there and don't make a sound, as you value your life! They are building contractors! Don't you see?"

She pushed me into her bedroom so hastily that I had no choice. I found myself sitting on her bed and forced to listen, whether I wanted to or not, because the door was open.

I didn't mind listening, I am free to state, for I was desperately curious.

"Bee," said Lyddy. "I want to ask you what you know about Bob Mygatt's engagement? In the first place, is he engaged?"

"Always!" said Bee smiling. "Either in something questionable or in marriage!"

"Humph!" said Lyddy. "One means the other generally, if you ask my opinion. Is he engaged to that girl, really?"

"He says he is," said Bee. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I only wanted to know."

"She is desperately poor, and it is, in my opinion, a most unsuitable match — one which if it takes place, will breed constant trouble and end in a smash-up."

"What makes you think so?" asked Lyddy hopefully.

"Because Bob is a born rascal — a fascinating, lovable rascal, who needs a rich wife, one who knows the world and who won't be too hard on him, and not a raw young girl with impossible ideals and a Puritan conscience. Bob hates poverty. He hates to be good. It looks to me as if he were held only by her beauty."

"If that is true," said Lyddy slowly, "something might happen to break it off."

"It might," admitted Bee cautiously, "if he doesn't marry her suddenly, before anything could be done, and show up some day with a wife hanging on his arm. It would be just like him."

Lyddy moaned. But Bee took no notice.

"I like the boy so well," said Bee, "that I've often thought I'd like to take a hand in

rescuing him from a painful entanglement. I'm sure he would be grateful to me."

Lyddy moved. I could hear her.

"Bee," she said. "Bob is very fond of you. He would do almost anything you advised."

"Oh," cried Bee, "I wouldn't take the initiative for anything in the world! Suppose I could break it off and he should be unhappy. Think how he could blame me!"

"Of course," said Lyddy hastily, "you couldn't show your hand, but —"

"No," said Bee firmly. "I certainly couldn't. And wouldn't."

There was silence after this. I could hear Bee moving around. It sounded as if she were dusting things on the mantel.

"Well, what would you advise?" asked Lyddy with evident difficulty.

"Advise whom? Bob?" asked Bee. "Or Ava? Why should I advise either of them? They haven't asked my advice and I certainly wouldn't be so officious as to volunteer it."

"Advise me!" bellowed Lyddy, in a sudden burst of self-surrender. "You know about these things! I don't! But I want Bob! Help me, Bee, and I'll — I'll do anything for you!"

"Will you sell the Kokomo land?" asked

Bee, quickly. "You've promised to, but you've never done it."

"Yes, I will! If you will help me to get him away from her, I'll place that land on the market."

"When?" asked Bee, suspicious of Lyddy's crafty pause.

"The day I marry Bob Mygatt!" said Lyddy.

Bee's beaten silence was sufficient evidence of her chagrin. Such a tract of land might take ten years to dispose of, and they both knew it. It shows my sister's self-control that she held her tongue, and gave no hint of her set back.

"Oh, well," said Bee carelessly. "I will think it over. Possibly I couldn't do anything anyway. Bob is busy rehearsing Ava for her part in his play and he is crazy over her just at present, on account of her voice, which is wonderful. They may be married now for all we know!"

Lyddy fairly howled in her middle-aged agony.

"Don't do that, Lyddy!" said Bee. "I'll think it over and let you know. I must go now. I want to talk to my sister about making up a party to go up to Bob's première in New Haven."

"Who is making it up?" asked Lyddy quickly.

"I don't believe it has been decided just how we shall go," said Bee slowly. "Faith is sure to see that *I* am included, no matter whose party she and Aubrey join."

"She'd ask me too, wouldn't she?" demanded Lyddy.

"I don't know," said my sister. "Are you and Faith on any better terms than you were when you deliberately made noises so that Aubrey couldn't write, when they visited me?"

"I wish I hadn't — now!" said Lyddy, honestly. "Say, Bee, if there's any danger of my not being asked, why couldn't you and I make up the party and divide expenses?"

"Because," said my sister evenly, "I see no particular reason for such an unnecessary outlay on my part."

"Well, then," said Lyddy, swallowing violently. "I will make up the party and invite you all!"

"That will be very nice. Do you want me to tell them?"

"Yes, please do. And Bee — please make all the arrangements. I'll foot the bills."

I nearly choked at the complacent manner in which Bee cleared her throat.

"Well, then," said Bee, "I must go. Will you excuse me, Lyddy?"

"No, I won't," snapped Lyddy, "till we've come to some understanding. I've got to be helped now. I can't wait. Even now it may be too late. I'm willing to — to do anything you say, if you'll only help me. Will you? I'm willing to do anything in the world!"

"I am afraid," said my sister, with graceful deliberation, "that your idea and mine as to what that phrase 'anything in the world' means, might differ."

"I know what you mean," said Lyddy promptly. "You mean that I'm stingy. Well, perhaps I am. You always said James was. And I'm like him. Still in this case, I'll do what I never did before. I'll pour out money as freely as those foolish Jardines, who always spend their money before they get it and act like the millionaires everybody knows they ain't!"

The objectionable accuracy of this description did not make the hit with me that it did with my sister. I could see Bee's shoulders shake.

"I'll take you all up to New Haven in limousines and I'll give you a supper after the play," continued Lyddy. "What's the matter?"

"Lyddy," said Bee, swiftly, "you invite Ava and Bob both to that supper, do you hear?"

Lyddy evidently hesitated a little at that, but she recollected herself in time and said:

"All right. If you say so."

"Now, Lyddy," said Bee, "suppose things really turned out as you wish. What would you do for me?"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Lyddy, who was nobody's fool. "You know—"

"Quite so," said Bee. "In twenty years from now, the Kokomo land may still be unsold. I want an allowance now. I also want you to give me fifty acres of land, and money enough to build a handsome house on it. Then I want money enough to run the house after it is built. You can deduct every cent of it from my share of the proceeds of the land when it is sold."

Lyddy, who had evidently figured on giving Bee a new fan or a few ice cream sodas as a just remuneration for her efforts, nearly swooned at the calmness of my sister's demands.

"What?" she roared. "What?"

"Now don't go into one of your awful rages," said Bee quickly, "for unless you do

just that, I wash my hands of your entire affair and what you can't do for yourself will go undone."

"But you've asked for a fortune," cried Lyddy.

"I've asked for less than what would have been my widow's third of my husband's property before you and he plotted to keep me out of it by his giving you all the revenue producing bulk of the estate before he died," said Bee quietly. "Now, you will seem to have seen the iniquity of that plan, and will have given me, of your own free will and accord, what was justly mine by right."

"I won't do it," said Lyddy.

"Very well," said Bee. "Then I'm going. Good-bye."

"Wait a minute," said Lyddy. "Where — where is this fifty acres you want?"

"It's the old Van Dam estate on Long Island."

Lyddy stirred with quick suspicion.

"Do you propose to sell it to the government for a lighthouse? Have you heard of an offer?"

"No! No! Is your mind all mercenary, Lyddy? I want to build a house on it!"

"On that rock? Well — you can have it. I never wanted it anyway."

"And will you lend me — say — a hundred thousand dollars?"

"A hundred thou—"

"All right! I don't care. Let's drop the subject."

"No! no! Don't let's drop it. I'll lend it to you."

"Very well," said Bee. "You have the deed made out. You give me the fifty acres. You lend me the money. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. But suppose — suppose —"

"Stop," said Bee. "I make no promises as to what I will do. But the first part of my plan is this. I propose to build immediately. Bob has a little hundred-dollar-a-month job with Sysonby & Arsenal, and he stays away from the office so much on account of his play that he is liable to lose his position any day. Now, it would be impossible for them to say anything if he brought them a contract to build my house for me, — to say nothing of giving me innumerable opportunities to ask him here on — business!"

Lyddy seldom makes a demonstration, and when she does it is liable to be unpleasant.

As in this instance. For she walked over to Bee and kissed her.

"The money," she said, "will be in your bank before three o'clock to-day."

I had been sitting on the bed, but at that I fell over.

CHAPTER IX

DEVELOPMENTS

TIME passed on and, thanks to Munson's custom of telling his private affairs to the world at large, everybody knew that things were rapidly growing worse with him. Neither he nor Eleanor had got a single commission for over a year; they had no luck at exhibitions; they only took silver medals when they assured us they would have taken gold, had not the pull of other artists with the Committee of Awards been so strong, and the only thing they had to live on was the rent from our apartment.

Of course that would have been enough, had the Munsons been ordinary people, but being artists and a particularly wild species at that, they had sunk the entire proceeds of their last big commission of two years before in a stock-farm in the most expensive part of Long Island, where they chose, as an innocent pastime, the raising of Arabian horses.

Why Long Island, when even millionaires

put stock-farms over in cheaper Jersey, no one could tell. Even the Munsons themselves had no answer to that question, but then the Munsons had no adequate answer to any question of expediency.

Arabian horses are doubtless very beautiful, and their breeding interesting, but not to the general run of the public, who prefer automobiles, yachts or private cars for luxuries. But it was exquisitely like the Munsons to prefer Arabians, and to stick to them in the face of advice, pleading and acrimonious comment. Just as it was their habit to look upon a palace in Algiers with an American pianola and no other furniture as a normal investment of their first large batch of money, and against which idea they would listen to no criticism and whose inhabiting for seven years while the world promptly forgot them, they persisted in regarding as natural and rational.

However, when all their money went for things like these and they were staggering under a burden of debt, and our rent went into the voracious mouths of blooded horses, leaving them with nothing for *their* rent or food or clothes, it came hard on their friends to be passionately called upon to understand, sympathize and rage over their self-inflicted predicament.

Such, however, was the state of the case. Munson's tall figure drooped still lower and his short, pointed beard was twisted more tightly than usual by his nervous, agitated fingers.

Nevertheless, it gave him a sort of sad comfort to talk about it, and talk about it he did to every man, woman and child who would listen. When the interesting season arrived, Munson developed into a sort of agitated, vicarious midwife—for Munson never did any real work of a domestic character no matter how urgent the need—and his conversation was embellished with obstetrical efforts which often sent some of his more sensitive listeners from the room, not blushingly, for Munson's conversation never verged on the vulgar or too plainly spoken. Surely no one in the world could converse on indelicate subjects with the delicacy of Munson. It was only that certain of his listeners objected to his selection of topics. But quite regardless of mental objections, as long as his ears were unaffronted by verbal protests, Munson's charmingly rounded sentences, exquisitely expressed, purled from his lips in a stream which there was no checking and no damming—except mentally, as Aubrey observed.

Munson got no sympathy from the Keeps nor the Jimmies nor Bee nor Aubrey. They

listened politely, that was all. But I, who came wholly under the charm of his delicious verbalisms, was also a believing sympathizer, and when he sat down with me quietly to tell me, confidentially, the worst of it, I was like to get no sleep that night.

I knew that the real cause of my disquiet would only arouse Aubrey's ire, for he objects to either man or woman deliberately preying upon quick sympathies, so I set myself privately to get Munson a commission.

After many letters and much secret anxiety, I finally got, through a personal friend, the order for a magazine cover. Munson made it, took it down in person, perfectly charmed the editor by an hour's conversation, and came home grinning. He felt that he had struck his gait at last. He at once made six others, very ugly but classic, and peddled them assiduously, meeting with rebuffs, rudeness and verbal insults from art editors, all of which was grist for his conversational mill and with accounts of whose ignorance he convulsed each of his friends in turn, until he had been the rounds.

So again I took up the struggle to get him personal interviews with my personal friends. But his indifference by this time was such that he refused even to wrap and cord the pictures

for the expressman, saying that I could do it if I had faith enough. Yet still he was torturing me with descriptions of his duns and the rude insistence of his creditors. Then he further worked upon my susceptibilities by descriptions of the sufferings of his horses — especially of the newly made mothers — of hunger, because his feed man had cut off his supplies. Eleanor has since repudiated every one of these stories, and has branded them as deliberate fabrications, but I believed them absolutely at the time.

Then there was trouble about the payment for the one cover design which had been accepted. I telephoned two or three times and finally wrote. I got a reply saying that a cheque had been duly sent on such and such a date. I told the Munsons. Neither looked up from his work.

“Oh,” said Munson, looking at his picture in a hand-glass, “that was last Saturday, the day Eleanor tore up all the mail without opening any of it.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Munson, shutting one eye to get a better perspective of a study she was making for a portrait, which she hoped to get, “whenever things look like advertisements or duns, I never open them. I just destroy them. I tore everything up Satur-

day. I must have torn the cheque up without opening the envelope."

Now to me a cheque is a holy thing — to be approached reverently with clean hands and a pure heart, and for these impecunious artists thus to explain the destruction of one capable of a month's keep, was to me something unpleasantly uncanny.

Any strong emotion always goes to my knees and makes them weak. I stumbled as I made my way to a rocking chair in my own apartment. But the Munsons never even looked up from their work.

It took me two weeks to get a second cheque without telling the real truth about the first.

Then came a rare opportunity. Aubrey's manager Einstein was dining with us one night, and greatly admired some small studies Munson was making of "The Idylls of the King," for which he hoped to get an order. The indefatigable way both the Munsons worked on studies for hoped-for commissions aroused Aubrey's wildest enthusiasm — Aubrey who always worked to order only, and whose only trouble lay in pleasing his managers!

Einstein offered seven hundred and fifty dollars if Munson would fit them to the hall spaces in the new house he was building in

Staten Island. In great glee, I told Munson. He demanded three thousand. I submitted this price to Einstein, who came up to a thousand, frankly stating that this sum was the limit.

When I told Munson, he turned and wrote for a few minutes at Eleanor's little desk.

"There!" he said. "I wanted to put it in writing so that he could get the full force of it. Just send it to him, will you, as my ultimatum?"

I took the paper and read, —

"DEAR MRS. JARDINE, —

"The paltry offer of your friend to take three thousand dollars' worth of work for one thousand is to me no more than a momentary amusement. Kindly advise him to utilize Lin-crusta Walton as a decoration more in keeping with his modest purse.

"Very truly yours,

"EDWARD MUNSON."

Munson is especially proud of his prowess in letter-writing, and, truth to tell, his letters are always pungent and bitter. That is how he makes so many enemies. No one could make as many enemies as Munson, by verbalisms only, but he sits up at night getting his

waspishness into epigrammatic form, and generally has one or two sample letters in his pockets, so that in the ferry or train, if you meet him, you can always count on hearing the latest specimens which, to be fair to Munson, are always well worth listening to, if only to know what to avoid, unless you actually crave the hatred of your fellow men.

I remember vividly my sensation as I stood with that paper in my hand and realized that Munson and Eleanor had not had a single commission in over a year, and that these very pictures he was then painting on would stand in all probability with their faces to the wall for perhaps a year or two more. Yet he had deliberately thrown away a thousand dollars in cash.

As I stood there wondering if Eleanor would not interfere with a word of remonstrance, Munson rose up with his usual precipitancy, which generally upset something in his vicinity, and I thought he had changed his mind. But he had only risen for the purpose of turning his picture upside down, the better to paint his horse's hoofs.

Suddenly there came a knock on the door of their studio.

Munson answered it. I heard voices, and after a few moments he returned, grinning.

"Who was it?" asked Eleanor.

Munson looked whimsically at me.

"Dare I mention such a fact before our friend, Mrs. Jardine, whose ideas on morality and finance are so impossibly high?" he said with a fine mockery.

"Tell her," said Eleanor indifferently.

Munson twisted his thin beard into two spirals like Michael Angelo's Moses.

"It was Bob Mygatt's ex-mistress and her illegitimate child, wishing to pose as Madonna and Child for my 'Holy Family,'" said Munson with his derisive smile.

In looking back on that terrible moment of illumination which followed, I think my horror was mostly at Munson's evil enjoyment of the shock he had caused me by the whole juxtaposition of ideas.

It never occurred to me to doubt him. Dreadful though it was, it seemed to fit in with my unconscious knowledge of the irresponsible life Bob led.

My first thought was of Ava Corliss.

"Are you shocked?" asked Eleanor, smiling.

"A — a little," I said with some difficulty.

"Bob is my cousin," said Munson calmly. "I am not proud of it, but the fact remains. So I let this poor creature pose for me when-

ever Bob has no money for her. Which is generally. Bob will marry for money — eventually."

This time they both smiled.

Lyddy!

What *if* this could be true? What of Ava Corliss?

"When did it — I mean, how old is the child?" I stammered.

"About four years old, — but small for his age," smiled Munson. "I *could* use him for the infant" —

But before he could get the other word out, I had fled, and even as I ran I could hear them laughing gently over my discomfiture.

I found Bee just entering, and although I had not meant to tell her, she got it out of me.

To my surprise, her eyes blazed with triumph.

"Of course," she said, "it is very dreadful, but it is very illuminating, — don't you think? And very conclusive."

"Conclusive?" I said.

"Very — unravelling, I mean," said Bee vaguely.

"I don't quite see —" I faltered.

"Perhaps not now," said Bee smiling.
"But you will."

She glanced through the open doors into the Munsons' studio.

"Not bricked up yet, I see," she said.

"Oh don't, Bee," I moaned, "you give me the shivers when you talk like that. I haven't taken a bit of comfort with either of them since you warned me."

"And a very good thing that is," said Bee firmly. "When you are uncomfortable, you are careful. When you are at your ease, you are suicidally reckless in the way you mother the afflicted. Whereas the Munsons wouldn't lift their finger to save you from being boiled alive in salad oil, for all you do so much for them."

"Nonsense," I murmured. "I don't do much."

"*Don't* you?" said Bee. "I know. Of course, it is not entirely unselfish on your part, for it affords you exquisite pleasure to work to make your friends more comfortable than you found them, so it is a species of selfishness on your part. Still, I can't help wishing that you were at work on people I had more confidence in."

"What makes you so suspicious of the Munsons, Bee?"

"Well, Monday I came in while you were lunching with them —"

"So, you see, they *do* reciprocate sometimes, Bee!"

"— And none of you could find the teaspoons. Munson was drinking milk out of a lemonade glass and he kept picking teaspoons out of his milk every few moments."

"Oh, I remember! He had absent-mindedly poured his milk into the spoon-holder!" And I laughed again at the recollection.

"Faith," said Bee, "you certainly are an awful fool to make a friend out of a man who can be so oblivious to the realities of life. How about that leak in the wall of your bedroom? Has he attended to it yet?"

"No."

"So, all through these storms, you have put up with water running down the wall of the room you sleep in"—

"Well, I am trying to get him to ask the building committee to look into it, and"—

"Trying!" cried Bee. "And how about your health in the meantime? How about your catching cold? There is a green mould on your bed-room wall an inch thick."

"Not now," I interrupted. "I burn a little gas-stove there all day, so by night it has dried off some."

"And that, to my certain knowledge, has been going on two months," said Bee.

"Well, as I said, I asked him to-day to telephone Mr. Dale, but" —

"But what?"

"Well, he asked me if I thought 'it quite fair to interrupt a man in business hours for a trifle like that!'"

Bee got up and walked around in a cold, ladylike fury. She never sees anything funny in the utter incongruity of the Munsons letting me actually suffer for a dry bed-room when they were eating at my table and sleeping comfortably on my couches and accepting all sorts of favours from Aubrey and me, whereas I obtained an exquisite joy from the whole picture. They were unconsciously painting their mental and spiritual portraits for me, with the sure touch of absolute finality.

Finally, Bee paused.

"Did it ever occur to you that the Munsons and Bob Mygatt are very much alike?" she said. "They are absolutely similar in their indifference to the ethics of things."

"The ethics of things," I repeated, with dropped jaw. "Where did you get that word, Bee? Somebody has been giving you a few spiritual ideas you were not born with. Last year, you didn't know ethics from a home run."

Bee bridled and smoothed her dress over her knees.

"Let me make a prediction," she said, a trifle consciously, I thought, even then.

"Fire away," I said. Whereat Bee gave the following two-dollar entertainment to me for absolutely no money at all.

CHAPTER X

BEE'S VERSION OF THE VENGEANCE OF THE EIGHTH

"**I**'AM going to make a prediction which possibly may surprise you," she said.

"Bob's play will be a failure."

"Why?"

"Because it is built on a lie. I don't believe he wrote a word of it."

"But, Bee," I cried, "where did you get such queer ideas? Aren't millions of plays built on lies, and don't they succeed?"

"Aren't millions of plays failures for no apparently good reason?" she retorted.

"But — but —" I stammered. "I don't understand how you — why do you think that way? I never heard you say anything like that before. I thought you —"

"Listen," said Bee. "You know I've been through a lot of litigation since I've been free, and I have had, between lawyers and business men of various types, quite a little experience of the way men — some men — treat a woman who has any money. My dear —"

“ Well? ”

“ Well, it would take weeks to go into it. You never heard of anything like it. And the tales I am told of James’ meanness! Why, the whole thing has formulated a theory with me that the unjailable offences, such as stealing ideas or inventions before they are patented, are punished here on earth, with a severity and remorseless certainty that you would hardly deal out to your worst enemy.”

“ As how? ” I demanded breathlessly. I do adore Bee when she gets started on such subjects.

Bee curled herself up on the couch in the studio, regardless of her “ blacks,” and began:

“ Have you ever had occasion to wonder why disasters of one sort or another, generally of a domestic character, often happen to apparently exemplary men and why others *seem* to go scot-free? ”

“ Don’t know that I have.”

“ Well, think and you’ll soon see what I mean. At one time in my life I began to wonder at these phenomena. And the more I know of people like Aubrey and Bob and Laflin Van Tassel, the more I am exercised at the inability of people to protect mental property. Your friends — men and women you invite to dinner and play bridge with — will sel-

dom steal your jewels, even if they get a good chance (although I do know some ladies who say they never leave thrust pins on the cushion or loose change in the drawer of the ladies' dressing room when they give afternoon receptions), but if you have mental property by which you earn your living, it is never safe. Ideas cannot even be copyrighted, as authors, dramatists and brain workers know to their sorrow.

"Many and many a successful play has been stolen bodily by the man whose name is now attached to it with all the honours of original authorship. Many a novel filched from the manuscript of a short story read to a friend. Many a 'gentleman's agreement' violated by cousins or even brothers. James did this several times, I have discovered!"

"I am not surprised," I said. "James was the limit, wasn't he?"

James' widow nodded.

"Yet how simple a thing it would have been to pay the inventor and stay honest!" she said.

"The contemplation of these injustices and crimes used to give me much food for thought. You know me. I felt that such lawlessness deserved a punishment which, on the very face of it, could never be administered. Yet I have seen it proved over and over again that the

Eighth Commandment can take care of itself. I don't need to sit up nights worrying for fear those who break it will get away with the goods and go scot free afterward. My observations during the last few years that I have set myself to watch, teach me that to steal a thought or an idea from a helpless owner of it, is about as satisfactory to the thief as stealing the blanket off a small-pox patient. If I had to choose, I would far, far rather steal money and only go to jail for it, for man-made law is simple and humane compared to the ills which flow toward a thief who is beyond reach of such law and who must depend upon detection and punishment by the eighth commandment itself."

I was luxuriating on a couch on the opposite side of the room, and at this, I rolled over in delight.

"Go on, Bee!" I cried.

Much encouraged by my interest, which was flattering, she proceeded:

"Thou shalt not steal! Certainly not! It would be foolish to steal anything that you would be caught in and punished for. But suppose — just suppose a fortune could be made by the appropriating of a small, insignificant idea!"

"What is an idea? What is a promise?

What is a verbal agreement? How easy it is to pretend to have misunderstood! And nothing can be proved. Nobody can ever catch you. Vengeance will never find you out. Will it not? Listen! I know a man with an utterly unmoral nature, who was honest because he never got a perfectly safe chance to be dishonest. He was well-to-do, healthy and apparently happy."

"Who is it, Bee?" I cried. "You might as well mention names. I'll never tell."

She shook her head and continued despite my pleadings:

"His chance came. He found an opportunity to double his moderate fortune. He could become rich — simply by repudiating a contract with a friend who trusted him. The temptation was too much for him. He succumbed. It impoverished the little family who have never got on their feet since, but as for him — his wife and little son have never known a well day since, and their illnesses date from the time of the man's crime!"

"Bee," I said, "that's a perfectly awful idea you've got hold of. It makes me shiver to think of it. I wonder if Aubrey ever unconsciously assimilates other people's ideas?"

"Never!" said Dee, fiercely. "Aubrey

and I may not admire each other, but I'll stake my life on his honesty and truthfulness."

I unrolled myself, walked over, shook hands with my sister and came back.

"Go on!" I said. "More! Scare me again!"

"I often wonder as I see this man's little son lifted in the arms of trained nurses and see the ghastly face of his wife, if he thinks of the terrible vengeance of a law made away back in the time of Moses? I also wonder if an open confession of his secret crime, full restitution to his robbed friends, and a complete reform in his life would have any effect upon the constantly recurring illnesses of his loved ones."

"But," I cried, "why did vengeance skip the man and land on his innocent family?"

"Because," said Bee quickly, "the vengeance of the eighth strikes one's weakest spot. This man in order to make money would willingly have been paralyzed and done business from a wheeled chair. But he worshipped his family. If a woman inordinately loves her brother or father, or a man his mother or wife — through that tenderest love the vengeance will come for a crime which human law is powerless to punish."

"How about a woman who marries a man

for his money without loving him?" I said.
"There's an unpunishable crime for you, if you like!"

"Unpunishable, is it?" said Bee. "It strikes me that such a case carries its own hell with it every day and hour and minute of the year. Such women don't have to wait until death to get all that's coming to them. I ought to know!"

"Now look here, Bee Lathrop," I said, sitting up. "These are not your ideas. You got 'em from somewhere! Maybe you stole them!"

"No," she said, laughing. "I didn't steal them. They were given to me. But what makes you think they are not mine?"

"Rubbish! Haven't I known your mind inside and out ever since we were babies? You never in the world could have thought out all that high moral stuff you've been regaling me with! It is not your style. Explain—"

"Well," said Bee, "Laflin Van Tassel gave me my start—but now I really believe all these things."

"Ah, ha! I knew they weren't yours originally," I said.

"He writes lovely letters," said Bee, with a conscious smile.

She reached inside of her blouse and drew one forth.

“Want to have some more in this same vein?”

“Fire away!”

“Here it is. Listen to this. ‘An entirely new philosophy of life cannot fail to open up to those who sit by and observe the world hurry past. People used to believe in a fierce and avenging God, who delighted in dispensing war, pestilence and disaster to His children, and that a pit of flames burned joyously beyond the grave, tended day and night by a gentleman in red, with cloven hoof and a forked tail.

“But observation teaches differently, and there are a goodly number of men and women who believe that all the Hell there is and all the Heaven we deserve we get right here and now; who believe that God is a father and who believe that only sin is ever punished.

“Such beliefs make a difference in the way you translate the eighth commandment, don’t they? If you hold these beliefs, to repudiate a “gentleman’s agreement” with a man or woman who has no way of defence or redress, is to bare your head to a vengeance which will make no mistake and accidentally

light on the man next door, or the woman across the street. It will find your own defenceless pate and come down with a crack that even the neighbours can hear.

“ ‘ I’d rather — I’d actually prefer the small-pox blanket for mine, for I am imbued with such a gloriously healthy fear of what happens to the secret thief that I now actually run after the conductor to give him my fare, whereas I used to steal rides like the rest of the church members with a godly air of piety on my face which shook even the composure of the spotters.

“ ‘ An infringement of the eighth commandment is a hideous mental boomerang, and to steal even a witticism and palm it off as your own is to violate the strict letter of the law.

“ ‘ Since I learned the good, healthy, wholesome fear of the neverendingness of its vengeance, maybe you don’t think I am generous with quotation marks!

“ ‘ I am not proud. I would rather you would all think from my generosity in quotation marks that I never had an original idea in my life than to borrow one without giving credit and turn around some dark night to see the avenging Eighth camping on my trail!

“ ‘ Take your cleverness — you, who origi-

nate it! Far be it from me to sleep in a small-pox blanket if I know it.’”

Bee folded up the letter, put it in her blouse and rolled over on her back, with her hands under her head.

“ Well, Bee,” I said, “ I don’t think I ever heard anything much finer than that. Laflin must be awfully nice! ”

“ He is the most wonderful man I ever met in my life,” said Bee quietly.

I coughed gently. Then I laughed.

“ Imagine Bob writing such a letter,” I giggled.

Bee sniffed delicately.

“ Bob! ” she said in a derision which spoke volumes for her opinion of Laflin Van Tassel. But as she volunteered no more concerning him, I forbore to press her, well knowing that I would get it all sooner or later. And I was so well pleased with the straw by which she had shown the wind’s direction that I felt able to wait with some degree of patience.

I suddenly changed the subject.

“ Look here, Bee. You don’t mean to tell me that that old woman, Lyddy, is sincerely in love with our Bobbie? ”

“ I mean to tell you that she is — just that.”

“ But she can’t have a hope of marrying him, even with your help, can she? ”

"I think she can," answered Bee.

"Well, what about Bob's affair with this other girl?" I said.

Bee paused and looked down thoughtfully.

"You say Ava Corliss has a Puritan conscience?"

"As Bob gracefully puts it — 'It sticks out so you bark your shins on it,'" I giggled.

"Well," said Bee slowly, "of course one doesn't wish to take advantage of the awfulness of such a situation, but I must say that it gives me the first solid terra firma to stand on that I've had since I knew that Bob was engaged. Most of the time I've been swimming in a sea of glorious plans. Now I can begin intelligent work."

And with that she left me.

Agape, of course.

CHAPTER XI

THE WIDOW ASSISTS

WHEN Aubrey's cousin, Col. John Mockridge, who is Commandant of Cadets at West Point, asked us to come up and help stage a play the officers' wives were getting up, we went with great joy, because Edith and John were exceedingly agreeable people, and as Aubrey cared for so few of his relatives, or rather, so few of his relatives were worth caring for, we eagerly cultivated those who were.

Col. Mockridge was a big man, with a big, booming laugh. He dearly loved to tell the story of how his wife once engaged a negro cook from an intelligence office, who had such trouble with the name Mockridge, that Mrs. Mockridge finally said:

“ Well, never mind the name. When you get to West Point just ask anybody to show you where we live. Ask for the Commandant's house. You can remember that, can't you? ”

“ Is dat whah you all lives? ” she answered

scornfully. "Den you needn't trouble me wid any more instructions, caze I ain't a-comin'! I wouldn't wuk for nobody what lived in a common dance house! I'se got moh selfrespeck!"

We played bridge a good deal in those days, but also, when Bee was with us and we had six, we played six handed euchre and bid for trumps.

I always claim that card playing in general, but this game in particular, can give a very good idea of the characters of the players, for while some are always daring enough "to go it alone," and risk losing twenty, others there are, who, even on a good hand, will be so cautious that they never play a brilliant game, even when they hold the cards.

My sister was of this character, but then, Bee was in every walk in life, very politic, very diplomatic and never took the lead openly in anything. Therefore it got to be a joke among us when Bee would say, holding a hand full of trumps, "I assist," whereupon a chorus always rose from the other five,

"The widow assists!"

But Bee hadn't come with us this time, although she had been invited to join us for the week of gaiety, when the play was to be produced — the week holding all sorts of delights

for the young people, including a hop, a ball game between Yale and West Point and several private affairs, to which we were all invited.

The second morning after our arrival, I got the following from Bee.

“ DEAR FAITH: Please ask Edith if I may bring with me that pretty Miss Levering. I have got to know her very well and find her charming. She lives in East 65th Street just off Fifth Avenue and has some money of her own — something like three thousand a year. Laflin is playing with her, but I don’t believe he means anything by his attentions, whereas, with this girl’s tact and money, she would make an ideal wife for ‘Dusty’ Miller.

“ She is crazy about the army and regards it with the awe of people who had relatives in the volunteer service in the Civil war — you know what I mean. So see what you can do.

“ Wire me if Edith has room for us. If not, I will take her to the Howe’s or the hotel.

“ With love to Edith, John and Aubrey, I am, as ever,

“ Devotedly,

“ BEE.

“ P. S. I do hope you will use what little sense God endowed you with in this matter,

which possibly even you can see is a delicate one.

“BEE.”

As Edith had an extra room she was glad to say yes, and I had just wired Bee to that effect when Dusty called.

Dusty was the nicest cadet at the Academy, we all thought. He was neither brilliant nor rich nor particularly anything. Only he was sweet and high principled and dear, and in his uniform, he was — well, he was enough to make any girl leave all else and cleave only unto him. His dancing was nothing short of divine, and the way he made each one of us feel as if we were the only woman in his mind for the time being, was something rather awful.

“I say, Mrs. Jardine,” Dusty cried out, “I’ve just had the jolliest sort of a letter from your sister, Mrs. Lathrop. Will you read it? I want to talk to you a little about it afterward.”

I felt myself go rather cold at this, for Bee thinks I am awfully dull at seconding what she terms perfectly palpable diplomatic opportunities, and I knew, if I failed her in this crisis, I should have to answer to her like a person at the bar of justice — such being the

firm manner in which my sister managed the family into which it had pleased Providence to call her.

But such was Dusty's compelling charm that when he pulled out Bee's letter I took it and read it. It ran as follows:

“DEAR DUSTY: I wonder if you will be good enough to help me out of a mess without helping yourself into one?

“The fact is, I promised in a moment of recklessness to take an awfully pretty girl friend of mine to a West Point hop, intending to put it off if possible until next year, when Loyal Jerome will be a first classman, because I have set my heart on getting him a rich and pretty wife. He, as you know, is a sort of cousin of ours, so it behooves us to have him marry the right sort of a girl.

“But if you please, the minx decided that she wanted to go to one now, and she boldly asked me if I couldn't take her to this one.

“I am in despair. I know all the cards are made out — I know you probably have asked your girl weeks ago — I know you can't get another card filled, but what shall I do?

“Will you see if there is room for one more? If not, she will simply have to wait.

“If you find that you can arrange the mat-

ter for me, please remember this. Miss Levering is very young — she won't be nineteen until next month. She has an income of three thousand dollars a year or thereabouts, in her own right, and her father will doubtless leave her more. She is one of the prettiest girls I ever saw, also the gentlest and sweetest, so I want you to make me a solemn promise that you will not make love to her, nor allow any of the others to do so, unless she should see and take a fancy to Loyal. Try to have them meet, if you can. It would look better if you introduced them, rather than myself.

“Wire me if you can get her card filled. I look forward to my own dances with you with a great deal of pleasure.

“With kind regards to ‘Dutch’ and ‘Lamps,’ I am,

“Very sincerely your friend,

“BEATRICE LATHROP.

“P. S. It will not do you the slightest good to get silly over Miss Levering yourself, as I have determined on my course of action, so beware!

“B. L.”

I looked at him suspiciously to see if the smell of cheese was noticeable on the trap, but

evidently it wasn't, for I looked him straight in the eye and I saw there what pleased me so much that I instantly decided that if Amy Levering wanted to settle herself in life with a good husband, she couldn't do better than to let Dusty Miller fall in love with her, were he so minded.

"What can you do at this late day?" I asked.

"Do!" he cried. "Why, do what your sister tells me to do, of course. What else is there to do when Mrs. Lathrop expresses a wish? I hustled around and got her card half filled before I wired."

"Have you wired already?" I asked in surprise.

"Wired before noon — to set her mind at rest and give them plenty of time to pack."

"You are a thoughtful boy, Dusty," I said. He beamed.

"Might just as well make people comfortable when you can," he said. "We only go along the road once, you know."

"I know, but you are young to have learned it."

"My mother taught me that," he said, simply. "It was her way!"

The quiet dignity and sweetness of the boy struck me afresh. I suddenly wondered if this

Amy Levering were good enough for him or if she were but "a rag and a bone and a hank of hair," like some other girls I knew, and would break his heart.

"Have you ever seen her?" he asked suddenly.

"Seen who?" I asked, ungrammatically but comfortably.

"Miss Levering," he answered, a tinge of colour coming into his bronzed face. The poison was already beginning to work.

"Yes, I have seen her twice. Once at a party at Sherry's when Laflin Van Tassel was allowing her the joy of ordering the dinner. She was awfully slow, but she was so plainly enjoying herself that he was most patient with her. He is a lovely fellow. And the other time was at a polo game at Coolmeath."

"Beastly rich, this Van Tassel, isn't he?" demanded Dusty jealously.

"Millionaire!"

"I wonder if she is the kind to marry for money?" he asked wistfully, being poor as a church mouse himself.

"Most girls are," I observed cruelly. "It is terribly old fashioned now-a-days to let preference interfere with business interests."

He looked at me with eyes which gradually grew brighter.

"That's a pretty fair statement of what love and marriage have come to mean in a certain set," he said slowly. "Preference and business interest. You remember what Stevenson says in 'Virginibus Puerisque'?"

I nodded. We had discussed it often.

"I am pretty safe," he said ruefully. "Everybody knows that I sha'n't have a cent but my pay, so I don't stand in as dangerous a position as this precious Van Tassel of yours — of being married for my money. The girl I marry, can't marry me for anything but that obsolete article — love!"

"Stop a minute, silly, and let me set your mind right on that delicate point," I said. "Army officers, holding established positions and representing, with our navy, about our only national aristocracy, have as much to offer a poor, ambitious or low-born girl as the veriest millionaire who ever needed a keeper to ward off bombarding females. Don't be quite so modest! You will be an officer in the United States army, and especially as you will graduate so near the head, you will surely get into the engineers or the Artillery, which means a lot. You go slow, Dusty Miller, and keep your eyes open!"

He laughed boyishly.

"I'm too precious to be allowed out of pink

cotton — to hear you tell it!" he cried. "Oh, Mrs. Jardine! I hope what you and I have talked about so often isn't all moonshine! I hope there is a sincere, truehearted girl in the world for me somewhere, who won't think that brass buttons and shoulder straps make the man. Don't women care for a heart any more at all?"

"Yes, dear child, they do — heaps of them! You are looking at a fool right now, who values sentiment and love and truth above — above —"

"Above automobiles!" he finished for me, knowing my weakness.

"Yes, even above those sacred pieces of bric-a-brac," I said fervently.

"I believe you. And — do you know? — it's a comfort to find even one!"

"Go on now, and find Loyal, and tell him I want him," I said. "I suppose a first class-man can so condescend when aforesaid second class-man happens to be a relative?"

"Are you going to tell him about Miss Levering?" he demanded.

"Certainly not!" I said with asperity, "and so prejudice him against her? Why, if we had wanted you to fall in love with her, my sister wouldn't have written you like that, would she?"

I reared my crest with pride, feeling that this neat touch was worthy of the tortuous Bee herself. But I felt guilty, not being an adept in her art.

Dusty looked thoughtful, then he shook his head.

"I never know what a woman will do, or what she means by what she does do!" he said in desperation.

"Which shows you are in a very healthful state of mind," I laughed. "When a man frankly confesses his inability to understand even the simplest woman-problem, all the other women stand ready to explain matters and to help him along."

"I'm glad of that," he said, rising to go and bowing over my hand in his inimitable way, "for I feel that I shall need help before long."

This little talk put me so ardently on Dusty's side, that when Bee arrived with Amy Levering, I met the girl almost antagonistically. Not that I should have, of course, for she, like the rest of us, had we only been able to keep the fact constantly in our minds, was only one of Bee's puppets, who danced at her bidding.

But antagonism could not breathe long in the vicinity of this girl, who reminded me of nothing so much as an old-fashioned moss

rosebud, so gentle, so modest and so fragrant she was.

She even had a certain sweet wistfulness in her expression, which I have always associated in my mind with moss roses, as if they begged you to treat them with gentleness.

Bee at once gave me particulars about Amy which further enlisted me. Her father had married a second time, hence Amy's money was her inheritance from her mother. There was a second brood of children, and Amy's position in the family was rather unenviable. Her stepmother was not cruel, but she was intensely ambitious for her children, therefore the hint for Amy to marry early and take herself out of fifteen-year-old Julia's way was given in a way there could be no mistaking.

The stepmother was clever, however, and in spite of risking eclipse for herself in not being able to make so brilliant a match for her own daughter, she was in full cry after Laflin Van Tassel for Amy, and was, to all appearances, in a fair way to bag her game, or rather, to run down her quarry, when a benign Providence caused the widow Lathrop to observe the chase and deign to take an interest.

Mrs. Levering did not know Bee's methods of procedure or she would have incarcerated her in some way, in order to keep her out of

the affair. But, for some curious reason, Bee is never suspected of being a motive power by anybody. Even after the game has been triumphantly won, Bee's esoteric part in the victory always goes under the modest phrase of "I assisted."

The first time Dusty and Amy saw each other was at the hop, and owing to Dusty's popularity as a dancer, he had been unable to write his name on her card before the sixth, which was a waltz.

Before that he had not even been presented, but I saw him when his eyes first rested on her, as she entered the ballroom with our party, and from the way his gray eyes grew black, I knew he was deeply stirred.

"Who is that?" she said quickly.

"That? Oh, that is 'Dusty' Miller, the star player on the football team. They count on his not allowing Yale to wipe the ground with the Army boys!"

"Dusty!" she said. "What a funny nickname!"

"There is another Miller here, whom they call the 'Moth' Miller. And two Bells—one 'Ding-dong' and one 'Jingle.'"

"What is his real name?" asked Amy, ignoring all side issues and still speaking of the man who stood looking at her over the heads

of the others as if he had never seen a girl before.

“Willing Miller — his mother was a Philadelphia Willing. He is a cousin of Cynthia Willing — the girl Jermyn Loring is in love with!”

Amy paid no attention to poor Jermyn’s aspirations. She simply drew her breath deeply and her colour rose under Dusty’s ardent gaze.

She was a pretty girl at any time, but that night she was enough to turn the head of even the most case-hardened.

Her dress was white and fluffed out around her feet in multitudinous ruffles, over which hung what looked like seaweed, or green grasses, in the midst of which were clustered here and there bunches of small pink roses. The skirt was looped with these little clusters, her sash was green, and her bodice edged with a narrower band of the same green grasses and pink rosebuds. Her curls were dressed in a loose Psyche knot, tied with a broad soft pink ribbon, and her bouquet was pink roses, with long green ribbons.

This striking, yet simple costume, marked her at once as possessing individuality and taste, the women critically dissecting it, yet forced to admire it, and the men, enchanted by the picture she made in it, taking it in

bodily, bewildered by the effect, without knowing in the least how it was produced, nor caring one whit. All they knew was that it reminded them of something cool and green and summary, and her wistful beauty tinged the daguerreotype her appearance suggested, with the old fashioned romance which lies deep down in every man's heart, and which springs suddenly to life at such things as a tangled garden of the blooms of his boyhood recollection, or the sight of a moss-grown well, or the bars of an old song, sung in the twilight.

Dusty Miller felt all this and more the very first moment he saw Amy Levering. He fell in love with her at sight and fell hard. And I knew from the way Bee drew in her breath and cleared her throat that she, too, had seen and observed his emotion.

Her management was masterly. She prevented an introduction, although Dusty's eyes begged her dumbly like a dog's. She surrounded Amy with other men. She took Dusty for her own property, and when she could no longer manage him; she gave him to me with a fierce sisterly look which meant "Take this away with you and do what you know I want done with it!"

I generally obey orders, but I am so soft, Dusty at once took advantage of my easiness

and came out with a request which Bee would have prevented.

"Introduce me to her!" he begged. "I believe I have gone crazy!"

What use would it have been for me to look bewildered and ask what he meant? I knew and he knew that I knew. So instead of obeying Bee, inside of five minutes Dusty and I were actually rummaging among the cozy corners between dances trying in the boldest manner to find Amy Levering.

But Bee was too much for us. She had Amy hemmed in three deep, so that when we found her even Dusty gave it up and turned back to dance sadly with me.

Ours was the fourth. Dusty danced the fifth with Edith Mockridge, who, in her capacity as one of the patronesses, kept him on duty until the music for the sixth was about to begin.

It happened that Amy's partner for the fifth was a cadet named Atwood, who was just out of the hospital after a sprained ankle, so they went around the room but once, then sat down next to me to rest. Presently I saw the boy go rather pale, and I told him to go out and get some fresh air and that I would keep Miss Levering with me until the next dance.

The poor fellow was profuse in his apolo-

gies, but I could see that he had overtaxed himself, so we urged him to go, which he finally did.

No sooner were we left alone than Amy turned and looked searchingly in my face for a moment, then with a quick sigh she slipped her little gloved hand into mine.

I don't know when I have been so touched at the simplicity of her appraisement and the confidence betrayed by that little cuddling move of hers.

I pressed her hand and said nothing. Presently she lifted her flowers to her face and behind that screen murmured,

"Mrs. Jardine, do you believe that two people ever fall in love at first sight?"

"I do indeed, my dear!" I said fervently. "My husband did worse than that — he proposed to me the first night we ever met and before we had spoken together ten minutes!"

Amy turned to me with a face flashing like sunlight on the water.

"Oh, how lovely! How lovely!" she cried. "And you — what did you do? Was it the same with you?"

"I regret to say that I laughed in his face and went on with my previous affair with another man. But why did you ask me that?"

"Because the first man I saw when we came

in to-night, has the face I always see when I dream. He seemed to recognize me in just the same way, for I saw, I actually saw him straighten up and look surprised, and his eyes turned black — quite black. I haven't met him yet, but all the evening he has kept close to where I was and his eyes look straight into mine always. The next dance is his and — and — he is coming for me now!"

I don't often allow myself to be foolish or overpowered in public, but somehow, both Amy and Dusty struck me as being out of the common and wonderfully sincere and unworldly, so that when I saw Dusty bearing down upon us, and looking straight into Amy's eyes, and Amy, without waiting for me to speak or even introduce them, rose and stood waiting, and then, the band striking up at that moment, Dusty just naturally opened his arms and Amy fluttered into them, it didn't even seem odd to me — it seemed to be the only thing in the world for them to do. Nor did I, as a chaperon, find it at all objectionable when I saw him draw her much closer than the exigencies of the occasion seemed to demand, and I smiled at them joyously for doing it.

That's the kind of a chaperon *I* am!

But after they were gone and my Angel

came to sit out a dance with me, I gasped at my shocking behaviour, and I wondered if they would be married before I saw them again, or only just engaged!

They have never admitted it, but I believe they knew before that waltz was over that they were destined for each other, for I have never seen such an exalted look on any two peoples' faces as I saw on theirs.

Still they said absolutely nothing, nor could Bee dig a word out of Amy either then or afterward, which accounts for what followed.

I have never seen an army post which did not possess its married flirt, and West Point at this particular time was no exception to the rule.

Mrs. Caxton was pretty, vivacious and utterly untrustworthy. She was a demoralizing influence which everyone felt who came near her, but she was of the clinging vine sort, and chivalrous young men, like those at the Academy, were loth to treat her as cavalierly as she deserved.

It so happened that Dusty Miller was her latest selection, and seeing the sort of devotion he laid at Amy Levering's feet that night, inflamed her shallow heart with jealous hate.

I exonerate Bee entirely in this affair. I do not believe that Mrs. Caxton needed to

have anyone point out how Dusty was falling in love, — still, I must say that if Bee had thought the affair showed symptoms of not moving to her taste, she was perfectly capable of setting such a woman as Mrs. Caxton to stir things up a bit.

But be that as it may, the band was playing *Home Sweet Home* and the last of the most brilliant hop of the season was about over, and the dear gray and white uniforms against the soft ball gowns of the girls were circling slowly and still more slowly until the end was reached, when Mrs. Caxton caught something of hers in Amy's lace, which tore so shockingly that not one woman in the room believed it was an accident.

Of course there were exclamations and apologies and introductions, and Amy was the only unsuspecting person in the group, for I saw even some of the cadets exchange glances.

Mrs. Caxton insisted upon taking Amy to the dressing room and examining into the damage, and they finally went upstairs together, Mrs. Caxton's arm around Amy's waist.

Mrs. Caxton finally wound the matter up by asking Amy to drive with her the next day to prove that Amy did not bear malice, and as

Mrs. Caxton had a delicious little basket phaeton, Bee told Amy that she would better go, and they arranged to meet us afterward at dress parade.

I saw Amy at luncheon and learned that she and Dusty had been down Flirtation Walk together, and that her first view of West Point had been given her by him. I carried the picture of that child's face in my memory for many a long day, for I never saw it exactly the same again.

I don't know what happened during that drive. I only know that when that Caxton woman brought Amy to where our party were standing to watch the parade from, I had to look twice to see if it were Amy, so white, so wan, so piteous was her look.

Mrs. Caxton's face was full of bright malice, and she left us with the wickedest little laugh I ever heard.

I have only a confused recollection of that superb spectacle, dress parade at West Point. The immaculate uniforms, the clock-like precision, the soldierly bearing of those dear boys — all were blurred. My whole thought was to shield this white-lipped girl from observation and to get her home.

As I laughed and talked with others I felt Aubrey press a paper into my hand.

"Don't read it until you get home," he whispered.

When I was at liberty to look for him, both he and Amy had disappeared.

I thought the time would never come when I could find the time, in that gay set of chatters to read that pencilled scrawl. It was from Amy and said simply:

"I have gone home. Let me go quietly, for I believe I am dying."

Aubrey came into the room just as I read it.

"Where is she? In her room? Did you bring her home? What is the matter with her? Did she tell you? Did you see this note? I must go to her at once!"

He caught at my hand as I rushed by him.

"I put her on the train — on the New York side. She has gone home alone. The child is desperately hurt and the best thing is to let her fight it out alone."

"Aubrey!" I cried. "Aubrey! You let that girl go alone!"

"I telephoned Mrs. Jimmie to meet her at the station. She will know what to do!"

"Yes, so she will! Poor dear! What was it, do you think? What did Mrs. Caxton tell her?"

"I don't know, but it must have been pretty bad. That woman is a devil!"

It is a serious thing to be a cadet at West Point when you are in love. Although Col. Mockridge was our cousin and could have given Dusty leave to go to New York ten times over, he wouldn't do it, for he not only ridiculed the idea that these two were in love, but he rather resented our believing it, and our interference irritated his usual placid soul to such an extent that he finally said that he was glad Mrs. Caxton said enough to put a stop to such utter foolishness as a belief among sensible persons that anything serious could come of a twenty-four-hour infatuation.

In vain we cited "The Brushwood Boy" and told of all the instances we knew, as well as some we made up. He was obdurate, and I was forced to see Dusty suffer during that wretched week, as I never care to see a man suffer again.

I believed in the love of these two at any rate.

I know this. Dusty wrote to Amy every day for two months, before she would even open a letter. She returned them to him, everyone. Still, he told me it was a comfort even to see her handwriting on the envelopes, and that he never tore one open without the hope that she had relented and answered.

In vain did I attempt to find out what sort of a lie Mrs. Caxton had told. Had Dusty

been foolish and written a letter that she could show? Dusty swore he hadn't.

There was a frightful row, about something else, ostensibly, but Mrs. Caxton was finally made to see that she was persona non grata, so she left West Point, taking her docile husband with her to stir up trouble in another post. Officially it read that her husband was "transferred."

Finally Bee did what only a very brave and a very clever woman would dare to do.

She set herself to bring Amy Levering and Laflin Van Tassel together.

To be sure, she knew by this time that Amy was a girl of spirit and courage, and we had all come to realize that she would win, along any lines she chose to lay down for herself. She had a will of iron under that delicate, wistful beauty of hers.

And her self-control was wonderful.

She allowed herself to be paired off with Laflin at dinners, and she seemed to all outward appearances to be satisfied with the way things were going, but once when she was alone with me she threw herself into my arms weeping bitterly and sobbing out:

"Oh, Mrs. Jardine! My 'Brushwood Boy'! The hero of all my dreams!"

She listened to my accounts of how Dusty

distinguished himself on the gridiron and how well he acted in the play, but no amount of art could draw from her one word of the trouble between them.

Finally, on Bee's hint, I wrote Dusty a long letter, in which I artfully mingled Amy's and Laflin's names. In fact, I stirred up his jealousy to the best of my poor ability.

The result of my prowess made me feel that my art was almost too strong for everyday use, for the next train brought Dusty to New York.

"Dusty," I cried when I saw him, "had you leave to come?"

He shook his head miserably.

"No, the Superintendent wouldn't give it to me, so I'll have to resign. But I don't mind even that if I can only see Amy. Do you think you could manage it for me?"

"Could I?" I cried valiantly. "I'll bring her — dead or alive!"

I brought her!

And I left them alone together in my studio for one whole blissful afternoon.

And they made it up — whatever it was.

By four o'clock they were safely engaged. For I descended upon them with tea and demanded to know. I frankly told them that I could not bear the suspense any longer.

They both kissed me, and Amy would have kissed Aubrey, if she had not seen how queer Aubrey looked when Dusty kissed me, so she considerately forbore. But she looked as though she would like to kiss the whole world and let it know how much beauty there was in life and how much to love.

Aubrey, who knows his cousin, Col. Mockridge, and the Superintendent and army discipline better than the rest of us do, looked grave when I told him that Dusty was here without leave.

"Unless we can placate the powers," he said, "it will mean either a court martial or expulsion."

"He says he means to resign," I said.

"That would be a pity, for Miller is a born soldier and would make a fine officer. I suppose, though, that with influence brought to bear, we could get him a civilian appointment afterwards."

"Oh, but that would be horrid," I cried. "He is so near the head of his class that he is eligible for the engineers or the artillery at the worst, and then to miss graduation and enter the army as a civilian!"

"He knew all that before he came," said Aubrey.

"Well, I should think that would prove to Col. Mockridge that he is in earnest."

Aubrey shook his head. Then he went and talked with Dusty awhile. Finally he came back with a serious face.

"I think I'll run up to West Point and talk to John about the matter. You can send Dusty to the Jimmies' for the night. I'll be back in the morning."

The next day a little before noon my studio presented an unusual appearance. Amy and Bee and Dusty were there, and Amy, all excitement, brought the news that she had spread the whole matter before her father and he had promised to call on me at twelve o'clock and look Dusty over.

"He didn't even tell mother, so that means that he is all on our side," cried Amy.

When Cyrus Levering entered the room, I knew why he had come to be such a power in the world of finance. He radiated strength, and the iron will Amy had inherited looked out of his keen blue eyes.

The young man and the old became friends in that first honest hand clasp.

"So," said Mr. Levering. "My little girl has not been herself since she went to West Point with Mrs. Jardine — "

I looked up in astonishment and Bee smiled.

"— and you are the Reason, are you?"

"I wish I could think that I had been," said the young man smiling. "But if I had had my way, her knowing me would not have brought that look to her face. The reason for that look wore skirts."

The old man's face broke into a smile.

"Do you love my child, young man?"

"With all my heart," said Dusty solemnly.

"Then treat her well and I'll treat you well. You won't have to live on just your salary."

"Haven't you told him, Amy?" asked Dusty.

"Told him what?"

"That I probably won't have any salary to support you on, unless I can get a civilian appointment."

"What's that?" said Mr. Levering, sharply. "I thought you were a cadet at West Point."

"I am," answered Dusty. "But I shall be expelled for absence without leave. I couldn't get leave, Amy wouldn't come to me, nor even read my letters, so I came to her."

The old man worked his eyebrows up and down as he sat watching the young man.

"So! You risked dismissal and possibly

ruined your career just to see my girl. Was that wise?"

"No, sir!"

"Well, you're both young. You can wait and prove your mettle."

"I'm willing to!"

"But I'm not," cried Amy. "I don't want to wait!"

"You don't," said her father, tilting her face up to his. "What do you want?"

"I want to be married the day after he graduates and have a big military wedding!"

"When I was a boy in Akron, Ohio," said the old man, "I joined the village band, not because I was musical, but so that I could wear the uniform. I guess Amy inherits my love for brass buttons."

"It is barely possible," I said, "that my husband has been successful in averting any bad results from Mr. Miller's action. He went to West Point last night to intercede for him."

"Your husband did that?" asked Mr. Levering. "Amy, you seem to have made friends."

Just then Aubrey let himself in, and I ran to meet him. I knew by his face that his quest had been in vain.

We introduced him and he told us about it.

"I never saw such a place as West Point,"

said the Angel wearily. "Influence, talk, arguments, threats, anger, rage, sweetness, tears, pleadings — all in vain. You are up against it good and hard, young man."

"Did you see Maj. Faxon, the Superintendent?" asked Dusty dismaly.

"I did. I don't care for him. He's not an affable acquaintance."

"What do they propose to do to him?" asked Mr. Levering.

"Court martial and dismiss him is the program they sketched out for my entertainment."

"Well, there's this to be said for Maj. Faxon. He is a sick man. He has asked to be retired and the Retiring Board is to act next week. He doesn't feel like closing his career by making a possible mistake," said Dusty.

"Who is to succeed him?" I asked.

"Maj. Featherstone," said Dusty.

I looked at Bee. So did Aubrey. So did all the others, just because we did. But Bee never blushes. Her eyes change colour.

Then a faint sound made itself heard, something like a snicker. I have since wondered if it came from me, for I was the only one who knew of both facts — one, of Maj. Featherstone's hopeless but none the less interesting

passion for my widowed sister, the other of Bee's sub-cutaneous reason for releasing Laflin Van Tassel from any possible interest in Amy Levering by marrying her to another man.

"Maj. Featherstone is in town," said Bee slowly. "He is at the New Grand Hotel. I — "

"You — what?" I demanded impatiently. I forgot that Bee might hesitate at placing herself under obligations to Maj. Featherstone by asking a favour of him, just at this stage of the game, but I might have known that my sister plays boldly to win.

"I had a note from him this morning saying that — that he had important news for me. It might mean that he is to report at once. In that case — "

"There's no time to be lost," said Aubrey.

"I might telephone," said Bee.

I escorted her to the telephone so promptly that it disturbed her dignity.

It seemed ages before she finished, for no one who has not tried it, knows the maddening delays of telephoning to any New York hotel.

Finally, however, she came back.

"Dusty," she said, "you are in clover. Maj. Featherstone has been appointed Acting Superintendent, and he says for you to ap-

ply for five days' leave — beginning yesterday."

Dusty's incredulous face showed how marvellous must have been Bee's influence to have got such a thing through the frightful red tape of West Point.

"What?" he cried. "Mrs. Lathrop, are you sure?"

"I am sure. Maj. Featherstone will be at West Point to-morrow morning. If I were in your place I'd have my letter there to greet him. I told him that we would manage Col. Mockridge."

"Oh, John is all right," said Aubrey. "When he discovered that Miller was really here, he was on our side in a minute."

"Hum!" said Cyrus Levering. "Well, Amy, you certainly are blessed with influential friends." Here he looked at Bee. "I'm glad you wrote me that letter, Mrs. Lathrop," he added. "I wouldn't have made more trouble for these young people for anything."

"What letter?" asked Amy.

"Did you think I fell into your young man's arms without knowing something about him and his family and his record? You owe more of this morning's work to Mrs. Lathrop than you realize, Amy. In fact I may say that

without her efforts in your behalf, it wouldn't have been done."

"Oh, no, Mr. Levering," said Bee modestly. "You held the cards. I only assisted."

CHAPTER XII

THE MARRIAGE OF PEARL MARGUERITE

JUST then occurred an upheaval in the domestic economy of our home, which deserves a passing mention.

It was Pearl Marguerite of course.

Although she was only the black general housework girl, Pearl Marguerite had her social uses.

I discovered them one evening when I had Patricia Marston and her Englishman to dinner. I happened to call her by name.

“Pearl Marguerite,” I said, “please hand me the red pepper!”

Lord Abernethy gave one glance into her black, black face. Then he laughed loud and long and the American joke then being told made quite a hit.

But I knew what had amused him, so that during all the rest of the dinner, whenever it was time for Abernethy to laugh, I called Pearl Marguerite by name.

Afterwards everybody said he was the first

Englishman they ever saw who could appreciate our kind of jokes.

Pearl Marguerite was one of the most competent servants I ever saw. She did all the washing and ironing, the cooking, cleaning, chamber work and waiting, yet she always seemed to have plenty of time.

I went into the kitchen one day and found her leaning so far out of the window that she was holding on by hooking her toes under the edge of the table across which she was lying.

“Pearl Marguerite,” I cried, making ready to seize her by her ankle in case I startled her. “Do be careful. It is nine stories to the ground!”

She humped herself back and stood before me.

“I wasn’t doin’ nothin’, Mis’ Jardine,” she said.

“I didn’t say you were,” I answered.

She gave me a queer look.

“I came to tell you that I have had a complaint made against you by the servants whose rooms are next yours,” I said.

The servants’ quarters in our apartment house were on the top floor.

“Now Mis’ Jardine, don’t you believe all you hear. I wasn’t doin’ nothin’ — cep’ — ”

“Except what?”

" Well, his do' was open, en I jes thowed a glass ob water awn him when he was asleep, en in de scuffle what ensued — "

" Did that scuffle take place in *his* room? " I demanded sternly.

" Naw'm! In de hall! "

" Are you sure? "

" In cose I is sho'! After thowin' water awn a sleepin' man, wouldn't anybody run? Wouldn't *you* run ef you done it? "

Put that way I had to admit that possibly Pearl Marguerite was right.

" Who is the man? " I asked.

" He's de butlah awn de firs' flo'."

As I made no answer she added for further identification:

" He walks out Sundays wid a brindle bulldawg wid a hob-nail collah. Yallah complected wid a big di'mon' in his shirt front. A real dudish lookin' man."

" I don't think I have ever seen him, " I said hastily. " Are you engaged to him? "

She burst out laughing. Now a laugh with Pearl Marguerite was not a drawing room smile. It began with a squeal like a dog whose tail is stepped on. She then wrapped her arms around her waist and went into a series of internal boilings, during which time she bent double and writhed as if in the grip of mortal

pain. She was very black and her teeth were of an abnormal whiteness. Seen in a jungle, all that would have been unnatural about Pearl Marguerite would have been her white apron.

As I carefully said nothing further to incite her to continue laughing, she finally stopped.

“Well?” I said. “Answer me. Are you?”

She turned her back on me and reached up to the gas meter — for no reason at all.

“—————!” she mumbled.

“I don’t hear a word. Turn around here and take your apron out of your mouth. Now answer me!”

“Well, den, I is!”

“Has he given you a ring?”

“Naw’m. He gives me a manicyohin’ set,” she said tapping her finger tips together coyly.

“A manicuring set! What are you going to use it on? The cat’s claws?”

Seeing from the contortions she immediately went into that I was not likely to obtain any further information from her in the next half hour, I turned and went out.

As I got into the elevator, I said to the man, a cinnamon-coloured man, whose name was Claude, and who loved adjectives:

“What’s the matter, Claude?”

He was dabbing a handkerchief against his mouth.

"I—I got a slight toothache, Mis' Jardine."

"That's too bad," I observed.

"Yas'm," he said, still dabbing. "My fo' front teeth are somewhat loose."

"I'm sorry. Have you heard the news about Pearl Marguerite?"

To my surprise, although a well trained servant, Claude burst into a fit of laughter.

"What *is* the matter?" I cried. "Why should everybody laugh at the idea of Pearl's engagement?"

"Do she say she's engaged?" he said. "Lawd! Mis' Jardine, dat gal's enough to kill a dawg wid her engagement! Why, Harol' is a mah'ied man!"

"Married!" I cried. "The poor girl doesn't know it. Why don't some of you tell her?"

"Yas'm. He! He! I reckon she know it."

"I'm sure she doesn't," I said firmly.

"She knows some gal has a cinch awn him! Mis' Jardine, you 'member Sunday evenin' along 'bout six o'clock, you rang up de reah elevator and axed Lorraine to go to de top flo' and get Pearl Marguerite foh yo'?"

"Yes, I remember!"

"Well, Lorraine, he never went, caze we both know dat Pearl Marguerite was chasin' down de middle ob de street wid yo' bread knife — de one wid de crinkly aidge — in huh han' atter Harold en a yallah gal she done see outen yo' windah!"

"Why just now, she —" I began hastily. Then I stopped.

"Yas'm. Well, I chased atter huh, caze I know she'd been up and lighted de oven en I was afraid yo' dinnah would burn up. I catch huh over awn Columbus Avenue, en I said to huh, 'Come awn home gal! Don' you know you done lef' Mis' Jardine's leg in de oven to burn up? You'll lose yo' place ef you don' watch out.' But I couldn't move her. So I went awn home and cooked dat lamb myself en made de mint sauce. Pearl Marguerite come in jes' in time to dish it up en wait awn de table."

"Was Harold with his wife?" I asked.

"I don' know. I didn't see him. Lorraine tol' me."

I thought over the situation very carefully. Pearl Marguerite was only eighteen and this was her first year in New York. She was alone, her family all living in Maryland. Finally I decided that I must have a talk with her.

Several days passed and one morning she broke the news to me that she was going to get married, and on Monday. She only told me on Thursday, so the time was short.

I began diffidently, because I really knew nothing. It was only hear-say, but the giggles of the elevator men and Pearl Marguerite's spirited defiances were wafted to me through the swinging doors, and I felt sure that something was wrong.

After telling her she ought not to be in such a hurry and asking her what she knew about Harold, I wound up with:

"Now, I am not saying one word about the man. He is probably all right. Only you ought to ask his friends and find out. Be sure about him. How do you know, for instance, but that there is some girl already claiming him!"

"Has anybody been talkin' to you about Harol'?" demanded the girl.

"Now, who would be likely to talk to a white lady about a coloured man's private affairs? I'm only talking to you like this, because your mother is not here to say the same things. She would talk to you just this way if you could see her. I'm only doing it to keep you from being fooled. Now you can go ahead and do as you please. I've done my

duty by you. Your own mother couldn't give you any better advice."

"Naw'm, she couldn'," said Pearl Marguerite.

I told her what I would give her for a wedding present and she thanked me, and said she would think over what I had said.

But on Sunday she said she had decided to go ahead with her plans and get married the next day. We all gave her presents and left her standing waiting for the rear elevator to take her down.

But I had no sooner closed the door than I remembered something I wanted to ask her. The car was slowly descending as I opened the door and these words came up quite clearly:

"She said my maw would 'a' said de same tings, but my maw said to me: 'Pearl, ef you ever gets a chance wid a likely man, don' ask no fool questions about his pas', caze I knowed a sassy gal what done dat once an' she los' de fellah en a yallah woman got him!'"

I decided not to ask Pearl Marguerite what she had done with her key.

For five days the girl Pearl Marguerite had got to take her place did our work. On the sixth to my surprise I found Pearl getting lunch.

"Why, Pearl Marguerite!" I exclaimed.

She turned a beaming face on me. One front tooth was gone and her left eye was swollen nearly shut.

"I done come back!" she said.

"So I see. Well, tell me about the wed-ding. Was it nice?"

"Yas'm. Hit sho' was. We went to de preacher's house and got mah'ied. Den we come awn up to my sistah's en she give me a fine deception. She gimmie a white cake wid icin' awn it, en as de gues' come in she stood at de do' en sprayed 'em wid 'fumery out ob one ob dese yere matanizers — you know de kin' — you squeezes de rubber ball and gets a squirt ob cologne en yo' face?"

"I have seen them," I said faintly. "It must have been very nice."

"Harol' say hit took de rag right off de bush," said his wife, rearing her head proudly.

"Where is Harold?" I asked.

"He's back in his ol' place downstairs awn de firs' flo'."

She put her hand to her swollen eye, which evidently pained her.

"Who knocked your tooth out and gave you that black eye?"

"Harol'!" she said with another grin.

"He did! And yet you still like him?"

Although ordinarily quite respectful, Pearl Marguerite, elated by her recent experiences, gave me such a nudge with her elbow that she knocked me against the ice box.

“*Jal-ous!*” she cried in a voice of triumph.

For a moment I struggled silently with my emotions. Then I said sternly:

“That’s a nice way to show jealousy. To half kill a woman.”

“Hit’s de white blood in him,” declared his wife. “A coal black niggah is all niggah, en you can count awn him. But dese yere yellah people, wid jes’ enough white blood in ‘em to mek ‘em feel dey’s ez good ez white folks en what ack lake white folks — den you get de debble!”

“I came in,” I said hastily, “to tell you to make a mayonnaise!”

“Yas’m.”

As I turned to go out, Pearl Marguerite said in a voice replete with satisfied ambition:

“Ise a bride, Mis’ Jardine!”

I hastily shut the door and left the bride washing dishes.

When I told Jimmie about her, he invited himself to dinner three evenings in succession and choked so often that Pearl Marguerite to this day hovers near him whenever he eats,

expecting to be called upon to slap him on the back to bring him to life.

She told me she thought the reason he choked so often was because he didn't "know how to swaller good!"

CHAPTER XIII

IN SEARCH OF A HUSBAND

ALTHOUGH I said nothing to Aubrey of my philanthropic plans with regard to helping Bee in her affair with Laflin, my chagrin may be imagined when, a few days later, he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said:

“ Well, I am sure we could manage it! ”

“ Manage what? ” I flared out, on the defensive instantly.

“ To include Van Tassel in our party for New Haven! ”

“ How did you know? I never thought of such a thing! It’s mean of you to see through me like that! ” I stormed.

He came over to me.

“ Don’t be vexed at me, little woman! Who wouldn’t know when your eyes fairly devour Bee every time you see her and when the conversation between you two ever since we were at Coolmeath has inevitably led to his name? Don’t I know, from past experience, that you have actually built on New Haven, and if that

can't be managed, you have thought gratefully of your genius at dinner giving?"

"I'd as soon be married to a Pinkerton detective as to you!" I cried. "I wish you wouldn't watch me so!"

"I find all my joy in life in observing your slightest action," said the Angel, with such a look that I descended from my high horse instantly and a description of the next few moments would be a bore to any but just us two.

"Do you want him invited?" asked Aubrey.

"I would like it if you could manage it," I said.

"*I?*"

"Yes, it would look far less marked coming from you."

"Why are you taking so much trouble? If a man wants a woman he always finds a way to get her."

"The ordinary woman, yes. But think how horribly Bee has always been misunderstood. And remember how public sympathy always went with James, because of his godliness and because of the conventions which bid a woman stay at home even if her husband beats her every night. Laflin doesn't know Bee — that's the whole trouble."

"Then he shall get to know her," said Aubrey decidedly. "I think he would like to like her — that he would fairly enjoy letting himself go."

"Oh, you darling," I cried. "That's just the way I feel about it. *I* believe he's afraid of her! He is rather simple and undeveloped and Bee always strikes everyone as being — well — *finished*, so to speak!"

So it was all settled and I gave the matter no further thought.

How Bee managed to hold her to it, I don't know, but Lyddy actually did invite our whole party to go as her guests. It was too cold for motors, therefore we went on the train, a merry, excited, nervous but happy family. And in addition to the Jimmies, Lyddy, Bee and Bob Mygatt, we had brought Mrs. Keep, the Munsons and Laflin Van Tassel.

Now the style of conversation of these four new comers into our ranks is worth mentioning.

Munson is far and away the most fluent as well as the most elegant talker we know. Slang knows him not. He dips deep into the well of perfect English, pure and undefiled, and reels off hours of monologue which holds us entranced, gaping and appreciative, wonder-

ing where he got it all, but satisfied to keep silent and let him hold the floor.

And it is well that this is the case most of the time, for any attempt on our part to join in his monologue, to vary it by a making of it a duet or a trio, annoys Munson. If we interrupt he waves us back by his hand. If we persist, he gets sulky.

Still, Munson sometimes bore interruptions, not gracefully, but without positive rudeness. But his eyes would flash interrogatively at the others to see if their impatience to hear him continue matched his own, and one could always tell by the nervous rotary motion of his long and intelligent foot, that he would not brook the interloper long. And the gently forbearing manner in which he took up the thread of his conversation, with a child-like faith in our having been bored by the interruption equally with himself, made an evening with Munson a succession of emotions, which ran the gamut from delighted admiration to the compassion one would feel for a confiding child, whose faith in the world has never been shaken.

Having travelled a great deal and being possessed of a rich imagination, a sense of humour and some delicacy of feeling, Munson had assimilated his material from every

source he had thus encountered, and he was equally gifted with pen as with tongue.

But he possessed as well the delicate unbalance, to put it mildly, which afflicts all genius, and this was particularly apparent when the cup that cheers was pressed to his willing lips. On one drink, Munson expanded. On two he exaggerated. On three he lied. But lied with such fluency, such imagination, such glorious potency of seeming truth, that he never could count on being invited to stop after one. The other two were always clicking at his elbow and his audience was smiling and anticipatory around him.

Eleanor Munson, his wife, seldom spoke at such times, but sat looking at him with the look a wife reserves for a husband who grows expansive on three.

Equally interesting, equally persistent but much more modest, was Mrs. Keep's habit of converse. She never took the initiatory as Munson always expressed willingness to do. She never interrupted. She never demanded an exploitation of her views, unless you asked her. Then if you did, you had to listen. Mrs. Keep was exceedingly matter-of-fact. Having been invited to express her opinion, she firmly believed you wanted to hear it, and hear it you must, if it took all day!

Now Mrs. Keep was not quick in speech. To tell the truth she was mortally slow, and in our rapid, telegraphic style, the Happy Family often supplied her hesitating tongue with the word for which she groped, or anticipated her meaning with an eager reply to her as yet unspoken words. Vain were we to think that we could hurry her. Her conversation was like a serial which is paid for by the word. It was longer than the tactics of the story demanded. But you had to take it all. You couldn't get on with the story because the next number wasn't out. If you interrupted her, she simply went back and began over, without any irritation, any hurry or any noise.

Did you ever try to shut the cat out of the house on a summer evening and have her come in at the back door? Then if you put her out again, the window did very nicely, thanks. Again she is placed on the mat and she comes up from the cellar. Finally you put her out for the night and lock up, and just as you go to turn out the light, you see her stealing down from the attic, whither she had attained no one on earth knows how, but with the expression on her face of, "I know you made a mistake to put me out. You really wanted me, so here I am!"

That is the gentle persistence and tactful pertinacity of Mrs. Keep's conversation when you have asked for her views.

Ava Corliss, while saying little, always managed to make us self-conscious. We always felt that it would be better for us if we each had a Mission in Life. But we don't want to have Missions. We jog along, amusing ourselves and doing what good we can, but we hate to talk about our virtues or feel them. The well-clad Christian is the one whose virtues fit him to such perfection that he is able to forget all about them. The Christian who is forever talking about the set of his halo belongs to the spiritually *nouveau riche*.

Ava disapproved of Bob's drinking and smoking and wouldn't go automobiling on Sunday. She also thought a cold supper was the acme of Christian hospitality on the Sabbath, and looked askance at us because we had a hot dinner and dressed for it as on week days. And because of these things, Ava's contributions to our conversations were the reverse of hilarious.

I pass lightly over the fact that she had no sense of humour, because Mrs. Jimmie had less than none, yet she was a darling and we all adored her.

No, Ava Corliss appeared to regard herself

as a Shining Example and it was evident that she had set herself to reform Bob Mygatt.

It was a good thing she was pretty.

Laflin Van Tassel was also so good to look at that it really made no difference to me what he thought or said. My scalp was hanging from his belt from the moment he joined our party, as he so plainly showed his appreciation of my Angel, his delicate habit of thought and his work.

Munson didn't like him. He said:

"Van Tassel is not my idea of a companionable man."

"What?" I said. "Doesn't he sit silent and listen to you by the hour? What more do you want of a companion?"

"Ah," said Munson, eager to set me right on a delicate point like that, "you seem to forget that there are listeners and listeners. Some listen receptively. Others shed the stream of ideas which pours over them, leaving themselves quite dry. Now Van Tassel, while outwardly all that is polite and courteous, deflects all I say. He doesn't — "

"I know what you mean. He doesn't sop it up!"

"He doesn't absorb it," Munson corrected me delicately.

"And don't you know why?" I asked curi-

ously, for with all Munson's intelligence I am sometimes so surprised to see him overlook a psychological fact like the one he complained of.

"No. Is there any reason?"

"A very decided one. Your habit of thought and Laflin Van Tassel's are as widely separated as the poles. Your reasoning is always materialistic, his is spiritual. You are a pagan, without a God or a religion. He has a code of Christian ethics which beautifies his whole life. You believe in hate and revenge. He is none of your orthodox Christians, who subscribe to worn out creeds and rituals, you understand. He simply, as you say, sheds all false beliefs, false ethics, false reasoning and pantheistic philosophy."

"That, then, is one reason I don't like him," said Munson. "Another is that he is at all times so hopelessly and, to me, obnoxiously, well dressed. I don't care for perfectly got up men. The contrast between them and myself is too humiliating. And I am a proud man!"

His big, serious brown eyes twinkled, and I laughed.

On the night of Bob's play, however, all these differences of opinion were forgotten.

It is difficult to argue from a try-out in New

Haven, because the boys are so enthusiastic. You feel as if you are in for a two years' run in New York. But, to some of us the air that night seemed electric with foreboding.

I kept looking about through the audience as if trying to find some one who was watching me. I couldn't enjoy the play, foolish and therefore successful as it seemed.

Ava Corliss, as Allie Gayter looked lovely and sang bewitchingly. Bob paced the narrow space behind our box and gnawed his nails with the sick stomach and light head which every first nighter knows. His usually ruddy face was a pale green and he wobbled on his legs.

Poor fellow! Didn't I just know how he felt!

We tried to cheer him up between acts, but we couldn't manage it.

"What *is* the matter, Bob?" I said. "Can't you smile and make us feel welcome? You act as if the avenging angel were on your track."

He started and gave me a quick glance which sent the cold shivers down my back.

"I hate this damned town!" he cried. "It always gives me the blues to come here! I knew it would be like this!"

I started in to comfort him, when suddenly

a thought struck me, and I turned my head away for fear that Bob should read my face.

Yet after the second act, Bob disappeared, and to the vociferous calls for "author," "author," the manager, flushed and annoyed, was obliged to say that the author was not in the house.

This evidently disappointed the college boys in the audience, for we could imagine just how much a favourite a fellow like Bob would be. Things quieted down after that and they didn't even give the Yale yell. Which did seem queer.

What *was* the matter with everybody and everything?

After the play was over, we determined to liven things up a little. We got Ava and prepared to be our dear Lyddy's guests. Which, as Jimmie said, was "something which could not be overcome at once. It must be lived down."

But nobody could have done anything with the awful incongruities in our party.

To be sure Bob cheered up a little, but Lyddy was rendered perfectly waspish by seeing Bob's devotion to Ava and his pride in her success.

Lyddy's manner grew more and more nervous, her tongue more and more peppery.

Ava was near-sighted and once in a while, wore glasses. For some reason she had them on at supper that night and it was the first time Lyddy had noticed them.

She looked the girl over critically and then said :

“ How glasses spoil one’s looks! With literary people one doesn’t mind them, but on a girl who has nothing to depend on but her face, it really is a pity, isn’t it? ”

Ava only smiled and took her glasses off, and because she had failed to annoy Ava, Lyddy said nasty things to each of us in turn until she came to Bob.

Something had been said about the money to be made out of a good play and Bob said :

“ I care not for the necessities of life. Give me the luxuries. I’ll be perfectly satisfied not to have all the bread and butter I need, if my play will only give me an automobile! ”

Then came Lyddy’s masterpiece.

“ You needn’t wait a day for that! ” she said. “ I will give you an automobile to-morrow on just one condition! ”

In a flash Bob knew she was in earnest, and being himself an ardent disciple of Graft, he said :

“ Name it, dear lady! ”

"That you will never take any other woman in it, except me!"

Jimmie said he didn't get the vinegar out of his windpipe for a week.

We all pretended that we had dropped things, and as we fumbled on the floor, Bob and Lyddy faced each other across the festal board, watched in a tense silence by Ava Corliss.

The rest of us drew together at one end of the table, where, as Jimmie said, we were "out of harm's way."

Then Bob drew Ava's hand under his arm saying:

"Such a gift would be useless to me, oh, sweetest and most generous of young women, as I am going to marry this dear girl — unless she refuses me on account of my poverty."

To my astonishment, Lyddy smiled — a smile of grim determination, which caused Ava to rear her head proudly and Bob to drop his eyes, and switch the conversation. He got up and walked to the window and Ava and Lyddy followed him.

"Somehow, though anybody can see it isn't Bob's fault, the whole thing is rather sickening," I said, in an undertone to our end of the table.

"Not Bob's fault?" murmured the Angel.

"If ever there was encouragement in a look, it was in the one he gave Lyddy when he told her he was going to marry Ava!"

"With her hand in his!" I cried, shocked.

"Isn't Lyddy a vicious old devil!" observed Jimmie in a genial tone of general conversation. "Did you hear her tell me that no woman who loved jewels as much as my wife does, ever married as rich a man as I am for love? I could smash her map for her!"

"You needn't take the trouble to utter such words even in fun," said Laflin Van Tassel. "That poor woman, hating, as she seems to do, every living creature,—even you, her friends, carries her punishment with her every hour that she lives, and is deserving of your profoundest sympathy. Just think of the misery of her thought! Never a kind or generous word or deed, which has not herself for a beneficiary. And not a tolerant thought going out to her in her loneliness from anyone on earth. It strikes me that with all her money—and I've been poor long enough to know the value of it—Miss Lathrop is the most pitiable object I ever have seen."

"By Jove!" said Jimmie. "You are right! I never thought of the poor old critter in that light before, but it is quite true. Not a living

soul in this world but hates her. Think of it!"

"I have thought of it often," said Mrs. Jimmie quietly. "What she needs is a little love."

"Well, you try and offer it to her and you are liable to get your face slapped," said Jimmie. "Love and Lyddy Lathrop, indeed!"

He looked at Bee, and added:

"Do you think you can learn to love our dear Lyddy during the term you are sentenced for?"

Bee shot him a strange look.

"It will not be a full sentence," she said. "You know even a convict gets some time off for good behaviour."

Laflin Van Tassel gave her a plainly approving look, and Jimmie was on the verge of understanding that something was going on, when the door opened.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH BOB MAKES A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

DID you ever drive a family horse on a lazy summer morning with such listlessness and loose reins that when he suddenly shied at a tin can and ran away, you were dumped out on the roadside, dazed and speechless and so sat there, just watching his cloud of dust and not even trying to do anything?

Well, when the door opened and in walked a man, a woman and a child, it did not need more than one glance into the child's face, which was Bob's in miniature, for us all to know that at last we were in the presence of the Reason for everything.

Yet strange to say, Bob looked more apprehensively at the man than at the other two, and the first words he uttered were:

“ Well, Shupe! ”

Shupe held out a roll of music MS. and said:

“ Would you like to see the original of

your play to-night, Mr. Mygatt, author and composer of the now famous musical comedy, entitled *The Alligator Pear Tree?*"

Bob shook his head, whereat Mr. Shupe handed the MS. to Laflin, who took it, looked at it and flung it open on the table.

As for Ava, she was staring in a fascinated silence at the child, who clung to his mother's hand and half hid behind her skirts. The woman's face was contemptuous and cynical and she seemed to have been drawn into the affair by Shupe, for she kept her eyes on him and waited for him to speak.

Only Mrs. Keep, Mrs. Jimmie and I were at all upset by the situation. Munson and Eleanor continued to smoke their cigarettes, elbows on the table, and to smile inscrutably. Jimmie and Aubrey drew together and looked rather white. Laflin and Bee exchanged glances, while Bob turned frankly to —

Lyddy!

Lyddy's face was, after all, the most worth looking at, for here she was, a homeless, lonely old maid, at the eleventh hour plainly in the running for the hand of a young and agreeable bachelor, fascinating, but so hopelessly disgraced that hereafter decent people must perforce shun him, wherefore he would be all the more hers and hers alone.

Her face, as these thoughts struck her, was a study in the passion of cupidity, exultant malice and — yes — an honest affection — love, if you want to call it that, — for our poor, graceless, disgraced but still interesting Bobbie!

'Shupe, noticing that Ava's eyes were round with horror at the sight of Bob's lineaments in the face of the child, spoke out in a voice of anguish:

"Ava!" he said. "Ava!"

Slowly she looked at him.

"Will you believe me *now!* Will you believe, not only that he stole my play, my poor play that I worked four years on, but that he has stolen your love? Yes, stolen it! He belongs to this woman, who, as you all can see, and as the Munsons have known for three years, is the mother of his child!"

Jimmie started so at this announcement that he dropped hot ashes on his hand and said:

"Ouch!" in a very upsetting way.

But the Munsons only nodded in corroboration of Shupe's assertion and seemed to feel neither responsibility nor much interest in the affair.

Dear Mrs. Keep was furtively wiping her

eyes and trying not to look at anybody — it was all so very embarrassing!

“ If you had only believed me, Ava, dear,” Shupe went on, with such a fine disregard of his audience, that I could not help admiring him, for we are a disconcerting set of listeners even for a series of plain facts, let alone a love story and a heart tragedy like this, but Shupe was so very simple, he did not know, and so he shamed us — “ I never would have been driven to this. I let him steal my songs without a word, because you were to sing them and because they were originally written to exploit your dear voice — ”

“ But he paid you for them afterward, Roger,” said Ava, very pale, but still just and fair.

“ Not one cent, dearest. If he told you he did, it was just another of his lies.”

“ No, no!” I cried. “ He *did* pay you! I — I happen to *know* that he did! ”

Shupe smiled.

“ Just because your dear husband lent him the money to do it, Mrs. Jardine, do you believe that I got it? He probably spent it on some other woman! ”

Just here Lyddy clutched her belt, “ for all the world,” as Jimmie said afterward, “ as if

she had been struck with the stomach ache," and we then saw that the Jardines had unconsciously and accidentally made her a present of an amethyst belt buckle!

I could not resist giving Bob one withering glance, but to my disgust, his blue Irish eyes were actually twinkling with the exquisite humour of the thing. I never saw such a man as Bob Mygatt! You couldn't shame him to save your life. There was no decency in him to shame!

Then Shupe turned his attention to Bob, who laid down his cigar, folded his hands and prepared to give his whole attention to the speaker.

"Bob Mygatt," he said, "it is quite useless to say one word to you. *You* know what you have done better than any of the rest of us. You remember the day I brought this MS. to you and you volunteered to try to get it before some manager for me. You said that my idea of a comedy written on the day of creation, with all the animals talking and the scene the Garden of Eden, was very original and taking. Well, it *was* taking. *You* took it, re-wrote parts of it, changed its name to The Alligator Pear Tree and produced it as your own. You thought because I seemed a poor-spirited chap, that you could bluff me out of it, but what

you did not know, was that I was in love with Ava Corliss and that we were engaged until she met you."

Here Bob turned and looked curiously at Ava, who had the grace to blush hotly.

"You are right, my dear Mr. Shupe," said Bob politely. "I certainly did *not* know that. I may go further and state that I was led to believe that I was the first in the young lady's affections."

At this Jimmie's entire countenance expanded in a silent but exquisitely appreciative grin. It seemed to do him no end of good to know that the stinger Bob had been so neatly stung by our godly Ava,—and with that Puritan conscience of hers too.

But after all, it was the Puritan conscience which decided things, for Ava, who might have overlooked the theft of the play, because Bob's smooth tongue could argue and convince anybody that black was only a deep shade of gray and thus but a trifle removed from pure white, had not taken her eyes from the child.

Knowing this evidently, Mr. Shupe had brought his reinforcements with him.

"As to whether this man has a right to marry any woman, ask the mother of this child!" said Shupe impressively.

But Bob was evidently, as Jimmie said, "tired of being the goat," for he got up, nervously clenching and unclenching his hands and turning several colours at once.

"Don't trouble the lady!" he said quickly. "The whole story is in my little son's face. This thing has hounded me for five years. I'm glad it's out. I'm glad you all know it. Now, you be the judges. What shall I do? I don't love the child's mother nor she me, though I adore the child. I do love another woman" (Here Bob kept his eyes neither on Ava nor on Lyddy, but safely riveted to *my* face!) "What shall I do? Marry her just to give my child a name—a name that nobody else wants, and so live out my life in hell, or—"

He stopped short, astonished at the passion expressed in Lyddy's tense face and loud breathing.

"Wait!" she said. "Wait! You said just now that nobody wanted your name. Ava Corliss may not—she's too good! But *I'll* take it. And I won't steal you from another woman either, who has the first claim on you. If, as you say, this woman does not love you, nor you her, and if—" Here she turned to Bob with a frenzy in her face so naked that we were all ashamed that we saw—"if you

will love me—*me*, you understand, as you have loved these other women—I will let you marry and divorce her, and I will take care of both the woman and the child for life!"

In a silence which could have been heard for miles, Bob Mygatt, as Jimmie said, "took the hurdle."

"And after the divorce, will you marry me, dear lady?"

Poor Lyddy!

We turned away our faces. We just couldn't look!

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH BOB BEGINS HIS CAREER OF MARRYING

I DIDN'T actually swoon, but things got black before my eyes and Aubrey got me some water and Jimmie accidentally dropped some cigarette ashes down my neck as he patted me on the back and implored me to "buck up" and not "spoil the fun."

Fun!

It was Laflin Van Tassel who took charge of the woman and her child and who got Bob married to her the next day before any of us went back to town.

"Why didn't you let us in on the deal?" demanded Jimmie, who hates to go to sleep at night for fear he will miss a dog fight or a fire or some kind of excitement.

"Because it wasn't decent!" I cried. "Laflin did quite right to get it done as quietly as possible. I'm glad I wasn't asked to witness the thing. I wouldn't have seen it for anything! How did they behave, Laflin?"

Jimmie bent double with laughter.

"Oh, yes! You're glad you weren't there, aren't you? Nevertheless, disgorge the shockin' details, Van Tassel. Tell her everything, or you'll die of her questions. They are small, but there are so many of them, they can sting a defenceless man to death."

"Not at all," I said, with pardonable heat. (Jimmie does make me so wild.) "But while one might not want to be mixed up in a disgusting affair like this, there is no harm in wishing to know how Bob bore up under the ordeal."

And then the same thought struck Jimmie and me at the same time and we shrieked with laughter.

"Honestly," said Jimmie wiping his eyes, "of course we oughtn't to laugh at the immoral spectacle of a man being obliged to right his youthful follies by marrying the wronged woman and giving his son a name, but honest now! To think of *old Bob* doing it — to think of Bob Mygatt —"

"Jimmie!" I said imploringly, as the door opened behind Jimmie.

"Oh, I know this is ribald and indecent," said Jimmie, fairly weeping into his handkerchief. "I realize what Laflin calls the ethics of the case. I know matrimony is a holy

estate and not to be entered into lightly, but soberly, et cetera. But what I want to know is, could Bob keep his face straight? What *I* want to know is, did Ava Corliss and that undertaker, Shupe, grace the scene? What *I* want to know is, was our fair Lyddy there to give the bridegroom away, or does she consider this simply a renting of him for a season? What *I* want to know is — what *are* you flagging me for, Faith Jardine, just when I am beginning to enjoy myself?"

"Because," I said in quivering tones, "Lyddy and Bob are just behind you!"

For a moment Jimmie didn't dare turn around to see. His mouth happened to be open when I spoke and it stayed open so long that I really feared for him. Then he got courage to turn his head and face them.

I think I have never enjoyed anything in the whole of my iniquitous career so much as the sight of Jimmie's face when he finally caught Bob's and Lyddy's look.

"We knocked twice," said Bob, to break the ice which had frozen us all where we sat, "but you were so congenially occupied —"

Jimmie flapped his arms at him feebly, and wiped the dampness from his brow.

I waited hopefully for Lyddy to express her valuable opinion, but she only batted her weak

eyes and seemed to be gathering her scattered faculties together.

"Well, Lyddy," I said at last, goaded into speech by the frightened silence of the others.

Then Lyddy rose to the occasion. She was shaking with fury. Her face was red with lighter blotches on it, and before she had said ten words, her voice rose to a shrill scream.

I can't remember what she said. I have only the hazy recollection that I was preparing to endure her tirade, as Bee and I had endured them hundreds of times before, when suddenly there was silence and we looked in amaze, to see Bob quietly but firmly propelling her to the door, and bowing as gallantly over her hand as if she had been Elaine and he Sir Launcelot.

As Jimmie said afterward, "He fair kicked her out of the room and she didn't know it!"

When the door closed behind her, I looked to see Jimmie and Bob clinch in battle.

But I didn't know Bob. He asked Laflin for a cigarette, Jimmie for a match, Bee for an ash-tray, crossed his long legs, looked around at all of us, winked cheerfully and grinned his usual Irish, Bob Mygatt grin.

Whereat we all relaxed our tense muscles and breathed such a sigh of relief that it sounded like a draught.

We waited expectantly for Bob to begin.

"James," said Bob impressively, "be thankful that you are married to only *one* wife. Laflin, think twice before you kiss the next girl you feel foolish over. This mad longing to kiss every pretty thing in female form I see, is what has brought me to the pass you now see me in, with a *was*, an *is* and a *to-be!* If I could afford it, I'd be a woman-hater!"

"You could make a fortune as a lion-tamer," I said, my deep admiration of his handling of the redoubtable Lyddy betraying itself in my voice.

Bob grinned happily. He grinned just that same way, I remembered, when he broke Jimmie's bird dog of being gun-shy, and we complimented him for it. As Jimmie says, "Bob's vanity is the limit."

But Bob was simply dying to talk things over with us, both to know how we took it and to air his own emotion.

"Why weren't you there, dear heart of ice?" he said addressing me. "Don't you know that in the future *whenever* I am married, I want you to behold the obsequies?"

How could anybody help laughing at such a graceless scamp as Bob Mygatt?

"I didn't know where the services were being conducted," I said.

"Services over the 'dear departed,'" corrected Bob gravely. "You put it neatly as usual. She's gone. I saw her off."

"Off? Off for where?" demanded Bee and myself in a composite tone of voice.

"South Dakota!" quoth Bob. "In the presence of witnesses, she asked me to come and live with her and I flunked. Flunked publicly and shamelessly. My dear Lyddy was at my elbow to see that I did!"

Now I didn't invite Bob Mygatt into this story. He came in of his own accord and stayed in because he became part of the narrative. I don't excuse him nor approve of him, and I am just as much ashamed of myself as anybody could possibly be of me, but the truth of the matter is that if all of Bob's audiences were as foolishly responsive to his iniquitous proceedings and ribald comments thereon as Jimmie and I were, it is no wonder that Bob felt encouraged to do worse.

"Then you are really going to put it through," I said.

"Am I?" said Bob. "What have I got to do with it? Am I not a mere puppet in Bee's hands, like all the rest of you — whether you know it or not?"

"Bee's!" I cried. And then again, "Bee's!"

"Listen to her!" cried Bob derisively. "Yet there are times when she exhibits almost human intelligence!"

Bee's smile was a little self-conscious as we all focussed our glances upon her.

"In this case," she said gently, "I never could have done it alone. I have Laflin to thank, not only for many valuable suggestions but for the entire execution of it."

"But — but —" I stuttered.

Jimmie helped me out.

"How ju know that Bob was willing?" he demanded, with no tact and less shame.

"Jimmie," said his wife reprovingly.

For once he never answered her. He was clenching and unclenching his hands and the end of his cigar was breathing like a locomotive.

It was only the second time I had ever seen Bob blush.

"Tell 'em, Laflin," he said.

"There is little to tell," said Laflin quietly. "We heard of the Shupe matter and knew that the play was headed for disaster. Then Bee learned through Faith of the existence of the woman and her child. She was growing desperate because Bob could do nothing more for her —"

"I always divided with her when I had anything," muttered Bob. Aubrey and I ex-

changed glances. We thought of Lyddy's amethyst belt buckle.

"So we consulted Bob and found that — that —"

"That things were getting altogether too damned hot for me!" broke in Bob. "Ava and her Scruples were choking the life out of me. Just imagine, if you please, for one moment, the spectacle of my being married, hitched for life to that Walking Conscience! Why, on my honour, I do believe all she saw in me was a Soul to be Rescued. If I'd married her, she'd have held me up to her Ideals with a grip on my hair that would have made Absalom look like a two-spot. But I stood it — that is, I trotted an engagement heat with her, just as a pace-maker. I really never had any intention of going down the home stretch with her, and I don't believe she ever really meant to marry me. I believe, as I look back on it, that she has always preferred Shupe. But how in the world she could, when she had *me*, I can't see! Can you, lady-bird? She was probably only intent upon Saving my Soul. But she is pretty, you know, and I do — did love her! Don't laugh! I'm trying to remember that I'm married!"

"And engaged!" reminded Jimmie. "Don't forget the next on your list, Bob!"

"So then," pursued Bob, "I looked the matter squarely in the face. On the one hand debts, disgrace, a sweetheart, a Menace and a Past. On the other hand, a dowered bride, money to buy Shupe's interest in the play, Freedom and a Fortune!"

Bob extended his arms above his head with his hands clenched.

"Freedom!" jeered Jimmie under his breath. But Bob heard him.

"Yes, freedom!" he cried. "You give me all the money that will be settled on me before I take the fatal plunge and see if I don't make good as to the freedom part."

"He will!" I cried. "He will! Remember the way he headed her off this morning?"

"Bob," said Jimmie, "I don't want you to beat her nor kick her — not too hard, that is — nor to black her eye, so that it will show, but I do want to shake hands with you just on general principles!"

"Shrewish old vitriol-tongued termagant!" Jimmie murmured in my ear. "Woman who loves jewels as much as my wife not marry for love indeed! Gee! I'm glad Bob's going to marry her! He'll fix her for us!"

I sat looking at my sister and thinking hard. As I looked back, I could see many things which escaped me at the time.

"And in spite of all these things being brought to Bee unsolicited," said Laflin, "she held her peace. She told no one — except me, of course. She bore her cross patiently and worked out her problem in the proper way."

Bee's face slowly crimsoned under the lively inquiries she saw in Jimmie's and my eyes.

But we would have died rather than give her away.

She bent an adoring and an adorable glance of gratitude upon Laflin, which was the first thing Jimmie had seen to arouse his suspicions.

He turned so suddenly to demand confirmation of me, that he caught me smiling.

"You fiend!" he whispered. "Why didn't you put me on?"

"There isn't anything as yet 'on,'" I whispered back. "Do see now, if you can behave and not spoil things!"

"So!" said Jimmie. "So! I begin to see what our dear Bee meant by getting time knocked off her sentence for good behaviour! Six months of South Dakota, Bee, and then you are free!"

Bee and Laflin looked at each other.

"Six months!" growled Bob, biting into his pipe stem. "Well laugh, you idiots! Laugh!"

CHAPTER XVI

DR. BRAGG PLAYS HIS PART

“ **I**’AM beginning to think,” said Jimmie to me one day. But I rudely interrupted him:

“ What? ” I cried.

“ Wait. The worst is yet to come. I am beginning to think that I don’t know it all. Now don’t swoon. Listen, and you’ll learn something — even from me, despised though I am! ”

“ Whatever you know, tell me,” I counselled.

“ Don’t I always? ” said Jimmie, reproachfully, “ and isn’t that the way I always get into trouble? I saw something that day we had our last illuminating insight into our dear Robert Mygatt’s character, and what do you think it was? I saw him *wink* at Bee while Laflin was explaining the spiritual way she had borne her cross. And worse yet, *Bee winked back!* ”

"Honest?" I cried.

"Honest and true! Cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die-if-they-didn't!"

Somehow I always believe a person who will use that school-day formula, because I never use it myself unless I am really telling the truth. I'd be afraid to.

"Now," Jimmie went on, "I believe that our dear Bee is, as usual, managing us all for her own deep-laid plans. I believe that she and Bob have been in the deal from the first. I believe that Bob arranged to have that woman go to the Munsons' so that you could hear about it and tell Bee — what's the matter?"

"Nothing, only I hate to be made a fool of. And I believe you are right on this."

"Bob has a motto on his wall which says 'Life is just one damned thing after another!'" said Jimmie. But I refused to smile. I was too distinctly annoyed.

And yet, so potent are our Bee's spells that, while we were yet smarting from the last touch of her goad, we became her victims again.

We had a friend by the name of Dr. Bragg. But there! He *wasn't* a friend. Aubrey said he was a necessary evil, like Lyddy and the necessity for sticky flypaper and occasional

family rows and other things which annoy more than their need is worth.

But Mrs. Jimmie had been afflicted with rheumatism for a year and had tried baths, doctors, Christian Science (unknown to Jimmie), and now, Dr. Bragg, the osteopath, was her latest venture.

Dr. Bragg was a bachelor about fifty-odd years old, tall, awkward, raw-boned, large-jointed and clumsy, with the clumsiness of a man who knocks down bric-a-brac every time he enters a room. He was in love with a Mrs. Cox, a widow who was playing with him, publicly and cruelly, as only a woman can.

Now, little as any of us (who are fastidious beyond our meed) cared for Dr. Bragg, we possess a rugged sense of justice, and we used to allow ourselves to become quite worked up over the hopelessness of the doctor's passion.

But he, like most men, was confident — oh, very confident, not only of himself and his own invaluable deductions on every known subject, but that he understood women perfectly. Besides, he was equally sure that he knew what was what and that he was quite capable, to quote Jimmie, "of trotting in our class."

Now we are conceited enough to think that

it takes a thoroughbred to do that, and Dr. Bragg was a rank outsider.

Nevertheless, we tolerated him for Mrs. Jimmie's sake, being positive that she would soon get through with him and his pretensions and be looking for a new cure. !

Our surprise then may be imagined, when Bee first met him at a dinner at the Jimmies', which included Mrs. Cox, to see her distinctly affable to him.

Mrs. Cox represented the *dernier cri* in millinery, and having had rather a bad time of it with her husband, she had him removed by law and was now in full cry after the good time which she felt, as a young and pretty woman, was her due. She was an idolator of Mammon, and if she ever achieved that heaven of pearly gates and streets of gold in which she believed, she would be much more exercised as to whether her wings touched in the back, or the relative sumptuousness of her halo, than concerning her spiritual privileges and the unusual companionship in which she found herself.

And wasn't it for all the world like a man — and it would make a gravestone laugh to remember that men are the choosers in this world! — but wasn't it just like *such* a man as Dr. Bragg to fall in love with such a woman?

The night that Jimmie and I began to sit up and take notice was soon after Bob Mygatt's first marriage, when Mrs. Jimmie had us all to dinner, together with our dear Lyddy, Bob, Laflin, Mrs. Cox and Dr. Bragg.

Now I have never criticized Mrs. Jimmie unfavourably in even the slightest manner, but if there were anything to be said, it would be along the lines of her being too sweet to suspect that she has people to dinner who don't belong. In anybody else, that would be a crime in my eyes. In Mrs. Jimmie, it is an imperfection, which, as everybody will allow, leans to virtue's side.

I would never forgive anybody else, who said even this much against my adored Mrs. Jimmie, but I am compelled to account, in some manner, for her having Dr. Bragg at her table, on account of what happened afterward.

Jimmie seldom notices such things. To him, we were a nice little family party, as he observed to me privately.

"Everybody," he whispered, with his eye on Lyddy and Bob, "in love in neat couples."

Of course our interest centred in the tentative sets of lovers — Laflin and Bee, Lyddy and Bob, and the doctor and his grass-widow.

Mrs. Cox started the ball rolling by saying

that she thought husbands were so selfish. They never made love to their own wives, but expected no other man to dare to.

As a conversation-starter among reluctant talkers, I know of no subject which is the equal of this. It has been in our family for generations and I expect to hand it down to my children also.

At first Jimmie fell into the trap every time and told how *his* wife didn't lack for love making, until I took him aside and explained to him that the trap wasn't set for him and that it grew monotonous for the rest of us to see him catch his paw in it every single time. And Jimmie thanked me for my explanation, with tears of gratitude in his eyes, so to speak. In fact, I think our friendship dated from that moment.

So now, when that subject is introduced, Jimmie leans back with the rest of the old stagers and watches the youngsters "take their turn," as he gracefully puts it, "in riding the goat."

The doctor walked into the trap so promptly that Jimmie's wink nearly upset me, and even Mrs. Cox, the sly lady, was forced to drop her eyes to hide their gleam. The fact was that she was about to perform that feat, which to a woman never grows old nor stale — of

compelling a lover unconsciously to display his subjection for other women to see.

I am frank to say that, since my marriage, to be obliged to observe this process, bores me. I think widows bore most married women for this and kindred reasons.

“My wife will never have to complain of not having enough love made to her,” began the doctor heavily, when Mrs. Cox cut in with,

“Probably not, for if she is at all pretty and stylish, plenty of other men will make love to her also!”

The doctor nearly sobbed at this, because he was so plainly afraid, with Mrs. Cox for his wife, that this would really happen, which it undoubtedly would.

“But if your own husband filled your whole life,” said the doctor eagerly, “what object would you have in permitting other men to surround you?”

“Oh, the same reason that every pretty woman has nowadays!” replied Mrs. Cox with a lift of her shoulders. “The desire for admiration! For whom do women dress? To displease the women and please the men! You can’t keep men away from a smartly got up woman! He may deride an ugly fashion, but he follows the woman who follows the fashion! And for a man to follow a woman

long enough is for him to make love to her!"

"But what I cannot understand," said the doctor in an agonized tone, "is why women — good women, nice women, sweet women — permit themselves to be made love to after they are married! Don't they know that it brings pain to a husband's heart?"

"It ought to bring a bootjack to the wife's head," was Jimmie's modest contribution to the discussion.

"It ought to, but it doesn't," murmured Mrs. Cox. "All women do it, Mr. Jimmie. Don't they, Mrs. Lathrop? You know they do."

Jimmie was spared a disgusted refutation of this remark, to defend our blessed Mrs. Jimmie from being included. (The Angel only looked at me and smiled as he quietly dropped cigarette ashes into his bread-and-butter plate) when, to our open-mouthed astonishment Bee — our coquettish Bee — Bee of the Austrian officer episode — Bee, the heroine of a score of gallant skirmishes, in which she routed the enemy, man, calmly stepped into the arena, and, abandoning the Juliets, Kates and Beatrices of the world, espoused the cause of the Griseldas in this wise:

"At one time," said Bee, in that tone of honeyed sweetness which, as a relative, I have learned to dread, "I might have agreed with you, Mrs. Cox, but I have recently changed my mind upon a number of things. I think possibly you and I are not good judges of what a happily married woman thinks, feels or permits concerning love and lovers other than her own husband."

I regret to say that Jimmie, in trying *not* to look at Laflin or me just at this juncture, got the hiccoughs, and the remainder of Bee's homily, which poor old Laflin was too thoroughly a man to see through, was delivered with the noisiest and most objectionable form of hiccoughs from Jimmie as punctuation marks.

If the Angel did such things, I'd send him from the room.

Now Bee has an exquisite sense of humour, not as violent as mine, consequently more ladylike, and, I, as her sister, knew that the whole situation was appealing to her like the stage setting of a Belasco play, even to the longing to stretch herself on the attic floor and beat her French heels on the bare boards and scream at Jimmie's hiccoughs, even if, for some of us, they did spoil her effect.

But the thing which saved her from disaster

(because, of course, Jimmie was as pleased with his hiccoughs as a boy with his first boots, and would have taken his oath that he couldn't have stopped them, although everyone of us believed that he could, and to this day, whenever we have no other subject to worry, we attack that one with bitter accusation and heated denials) was the pathetic manner in which the doctor, from behind Mrs. Cox's shoulder, nodded and winked and grimaced the completeness of his approval.

"Now at one time," continued Bee, laying one beautifully rounded arm on the table where Laflin could get the best view of it, "I opposed Faith's marriage to Aubrey because he hadn't the money I thought Faith needed and I didn't believe he could make it. I have come to see that they are happier in their affection for each other than millions could make them, and the sight of their utter content has done much toward changing my attitude toward marriage."

"Hasn't the fact that the old man has written one successful play and made a pot of money out of it had something to do with your tardy approval of him, Bee?" hic-coughed Jimmie.

Dear Mrs. Jimmie's reddening cheeks were more of a reproof to him for this than her

sweet disclaims of his lovely rudeness. *Dear old Jimmie!* However, one need seldom pity Bee, for she would scorn to be disconcerted and reproof never gets under her skin. She sheds it like a waterproof tin roof. She feels that she did not deserve it, therefore, why allow it to sink in?

"Not at all," said the doctor. "I am sure Mrs. Lathrop was convinced by the heart we all know Mr. Jardine possesses, in spite of the cynical brilliancy of his plays!"

A slight, malicious smile widened Bee's lips at this, and my Angel muttered something not fit to repeat.

"A woman when she marries should think of nothing but her husband until she can confidently look forward to motherhood," went on the doctor, turning to beam fatuously upon Mrs. Cox, but if looks could kill, the two Mrs. Cox and Bee shot at him would have stretched him dead at their feet.

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Cox quickly. "There would be no surer way, in my opinion, for a wife to lose her husband's love and to drive him to making love to the other women who have eyes for the admiration which is their due, than for her to do the deadly domestic act. If I ever am foolish enough to marry again, you will see me profit

by my observations, as well as my disastrous personal experiences."

"Whoever he is, he will be the most fortunate man on earth," said the doctor fervently.

Bee waited, as delicately poised as a purple butterfly while this interruption proceeded, but she held our interest, as she always could in any assemblage she chose to grace, and when she had indicated by a lifted eyebrow, that if they were quite done, she would go on, she said,

"Domesticity need not, of necessity, be deadly, if I may differ from Mrs. Cox. The days of the slovenly wife and dowdy young mother have passed. Nowadays wifehood and maternity are smartly and becomingly gowned, and the clever woman is the one who can make even domesticity spicy and perfect confidence pungent. If a woman can keep her own husband thoroughly interested, she will have little time to coquette with the husbands of other women."

Here the doctor's nods and winks were so pronounced that even Bee smiled, and our dear Lyddy voiced the general opinion, when she snorted out,

"Well, my lady, you certainly *have* changed!"

"I hope, dear Lydia," said Bee, "that I *do* change. I should dislike to think that I alone stood still, while all the rest of you are so palpably getting on!"

At this somewhat pungent reference to Lyddy's state of probationary bliss, Lyddy smiled broadly and glanced with aged coyness at Bob, who slowly turned purple under the lively interest of our composite gaze.

"Happiness is so rare a possession, that to acquire it, we are all compelled to pay a price commensurate with it," I observed with my eye carefully on Bob's majenta face.

"But no matter how high the price may seem to others," answered Bob, as if I had addressed him personally (a woman in his place never would have let everybody see that she felt the point of my dart, which shows how even an ordinary woman can often get the best of a clever man). "Men are always to be found who are willing to pay it, and glad of the chance!"

"Yes," hiccupped Jimmie genially, "they do say there is a fool born every minute!"

Now, lest the foolish sympathize unintelligently, let me pause to remark that this sort of thing was not cruel to Lyddy, for she was so dull withal, she never saw it. And even if she had seen, she was so conceited, it never

would have occurred to her to take the meaning to herself.

"Well," said Bob, "tastes differ. There are those who talk fluently of love in a cottage. They are generally those who haven't tried it. A three-room cottage and a wife who does her own work and whose hands smell of dishwater are not my idea of domestic bliss."

"Nor mine," spoke up Aubrey, with his slow smile, for when, in cur poverty spots, we have had to come down to housework and I have cooked, I have always recklessly, and with Aubrey's connivance, hired the janitor's wife to wash the dishes.

"But," said Bee, "if you are poor, Bob, you are always sure of being married for love alone, while either the man or the woman with much money is always wondering how much love, if any, is included in the bargain."

Then it dawned on both Jimmie and me simultaneously that this was what Bee had been leading up to, and that the affair of the doctor and Mrs. Cox were as if they were not, to our Bee.

We were so struck by the evident impression Bee's last remark was making on Laflin's mind, and the delightful fact that he was modestly taking it only one way, as Bee had confidently counted upon his doing, and we were

so awed by the skill with which Bee spurred her slightly tardy wooer into active thought, that we forgot the conceit of Lyddy, which made her consider herself attacked.

"I see what you mean, Bee Lathrop," she began, and we were so surprised and so taken up with other thoughts that we couldn't at once collect ourselves, so Lyddy got quite a little headway.

"You mean *me*, of course! How *dare* you say openly—as openly as you just did, that I am to be married for my money. I assure you, Bee Lathrop, there is nobody will be gladder than I when you and I can separate for good, and I s'pose *now* even this precious set of your friends who think everything the charming Mrs. Lathrop does is so wonderful and so fine, can *now* see what I have to take from *you*! I hope *now*—"

She stopped abruptly, and at first we gazed about wildly for a reason. But Bob had not moved except to look at her, and for the first time she had met that look.

"By thunder," Jimmie said to me afterward, "I begin to believe what Bob said about taking his freedom. By thunder, I'll bet he'll take it with both hands. I tell you I didn't think the fool had it in him to look at any human being with such a look—it was posi-

tively murderous, wasn't it, Faith? — and you know you were tickled to death that she was getting it, weren't you, now? I tell you, I didn't think it was *in* the brute! By thunder, I didn't!"

Jimmie's vocabulary of decent expletives is limited, therefore I excuse in him what would be tautology in others.

But as I heartily agreed with him in his incoherent but nevertheless sincere admiration of Bob's suppression of the redoubtable Lyddy, I said nothing and thereby lost a valuable opportunity of stirring him up.

After Lyddy subsided, there was a momentary silence, and we all sat watching Bob, who was plainly of two minds about something. He knocked invisible ashes from his cigarette with a nervous little finger several times, then he said quietly,

"I beg your pardon, Bee — "

And again he looked at Lyddy, who stared back at him as if hypnotized and then muttered,

"I beg your pardon, Bee. I — I didn't mean what I said."

"I am sure you didn't, Lyddy," said Bee, with a degree of cordiality in her tones that any woman could have thrown, who knew that every man at the table was her secret cham-

pion and who was upborne by the fact that one had espoused her cause openly.

But Bee always managed to — not to *place* herself in the right, as I have to do with a loud splash, if ever I happen to get there, — but to *be* in the right, to be there first and be sitting there, waiting for us to enter through the door of Wrong and see her mounted as securely on the throne of Right as if she had grown there!

However, all this is by the way, and went unobserved except by a few. Laflin, for example, lost the whole of it, for he had never taken his eyes from Bee since her remark about being loved for herself, and that Bee was acutely conscious of his observation, any sister would know, by signs invisible to the naked eye and impossible to describe, but still there!

Then, too, she had the pleasing consciousness that Laflin had been an ear-witness to the sort of thing she had to put up with from her sister-in-law under the condition in which her husband left his estate, and as Bee was much too diplomatic ever to complain, she never had been quite sure that Laflin knew what she had to bear up under — in short, that he had rendered her that full meed of his admiration which she felt that she deserved.

So Bee was just in that exalted frame of mind which too often is followed by a disaster which none of us could foresee and which never would have happened, or rather, which never would have been of just that unbearable degree of vulgarity it proved, if there had not been aliens in our midst.

(I don't call an "in-law" like Lyddy an alien, for almost everybody is obliged to submit to traits and characteristics in "in-laws" which, like barked shins, sprained ankles or black-and-blue spots, are due to our own carelessness in not seeing where we are going. Such things, therefore, people are not especially blamed for or sympathized with on account of them. We just pass them over in silence, as all in the day's work.)

Bee seemed to feel that she must change the subject from the foolishness of the doctor's monopoly, so, taking my cue and entirely forgetting that there were outsiders present, I launched out on a description of how we had to cook our bedroom by day in order to sleep in it by night, and from that we got to telling jokes on the Munsons, perfectly harmless in themselves, but full of deadly insult if repeated by a stranger, and all would have been well, if Bee had been able to hold herself in.

But manners, or rather *savoir faire*, is more

to Bee than home or husband or child or wealth or religion, and the quality of the aliens in our midst got on her nerves, as you shall hear, not to *her* undoing! Oh, no! Fate always skipped Bee's elaborate coiffure and landed with unerring aim on *my* unprotected skull.

The moment the conversation lagged, the doctor harked back to his own case, just as a confiding Newfoundland can never see why he is not just as welcome in the drawing room as the Blenheim, and keeps returning to try his luck again and again.

“Love in marriage has *not* gone out of fashion, ladies,” he began ponderously. “Men — good men — the sort of men who make good husbands never marry for anything else. And women should do the same. If you would only fix your mind on the enduring qualities of heart and soul which a man possesses, and marry for those things, there would be less demand on your part for admiration from other men.”

He so plainly was wooing Mrs. Cox under this attempt at generalization that the lady had the grace to blush.

“I can conceive of no greater bore,” observed Mrs. Cox icily, “than fixing my mind on my husband’s enduring qualities of heart

and soul when I wanted a younger and handsomer man to make love to me. Can you, Mrs. Lathrop?"

The doctor signalled frantically to Bee.

"Yes, I can," said Bee. "If I should ever marry again, which is not likely —"

Here Lyddy's loud sniff of disbelief voiced the general dissent of our little party so exquisitely that Jimmie turned a laugh into a sneeze and then cleared his throat noisily to prove that he really *had* a cold —

"I should never even accept a man, in whom I was not violently in love. Yes, violently. That word may seem rather to belong to Faith than to me, but as I said, my views have been changing, and if I could be sure of being loved for myself alone, I could be satisfied with the companionship of just that one man, and never think of any other."

The doctor leaned back suddenly and beamed on the company as if fully satisfied. The poor man could not see that every word Bee spoke, which so pleased him, was rendering Mrs. Cox more unruly and defiant, and that her growing irritation boded no good to him on the way home. He felt Bee's influence, and he considered the subject settled.

When we went into the drawing room for coffee, he planted his feet on Bee's train and

whispered to her for fully five minutes. We could see Bee's lips widening behind her fan.

Jimmie said he heard every word.

"He's telling her how he loves Mrs. Cox and thanking her for *championing his cause* at dinner. Did you get that? He thinks she was trying to help him! 'Oh, Lord!'"

And he hiccupped loudly.

Bee evidently had stood all she was going to, for she tires easily. She interrupted the doctor and said something which caused his jaw to drop.

"Watch 'im!" urged Jimmie, hitting my elbow and making me spill my coffee. "Oh, I *beg* your pardon!"

As if that did any good.

"She is probably telling him that he and his affair weren't in her mind at all," I said in Jimmie's ear, "because she wants him to get off her dress and go home, so she can talk to Laflin."

Which was exactly what she was doing, as it turned out afterward. Only she went further and told him that Mrs. Cox was totally unsuited to him as a wife and she advised him to look where he was going.

Then when the doctor had departed, indignant with surprise, and Bee was sure Laflin

was approaching, as indeed he was, Mrs. Cox dropped gracefully down on the sofa beside Bee, shaking her fan at Laflin's discomfiture and blind to the green light in Bee's eyes.

What she said we could not hear, but Mrs. Cox's face underwent several changes, and things began to look interesting when Laflin again approached the sofa which held the two women, with an American beauty rose in his hand with the longest stem I ever saw.

Bee gave an involuntary exclamation of pleasure at the beauty of it, and held out her hand to take it as Laflin offered it to her, when the doctor stepped up and took it from Laflin's hand.

He did not know he was rude. He was simply born that kind of an animal.

"My, but that has a fine smell!" he exclaimed, burying his nose in its fragrance and crushing the flower against his face in a manner which made us all wince. "But these thorns are bad. Allow me!" And with the air of doing Bee a favour and before anyone could cry out, he had whipped out his knife and cut the stem six inches below the rose and proffered the now mutilated flower to Bee.

Have you ever seen a lady simply furious? A woman with the restraint of civilization

about her, yet seething with a primitive rage which made her long to bury her teeth and nails in her victim's tenderest part?

I felt sorry for Bee, not because of her poor rose or Laflin, but because she was a lady and couldn't say what she looked and felt.

She gave one look at Mrs. Cox which said as plainly as words,

“If you marry, you will marry — that!”

And Mrs. Cox's crimson face answered that she didn't blame Bee at all, but for Bee just to wait until she got the doctor alone.

She took him home without any further pretext and the simple-minded man beamed on us all a beatific beam of fatuous happiness as we, with faces set with apprehension, saw them go.

“Gee!” said Jimmie, as the front door slammed. “Was I ever such a blind ass as that, even *before* I was married?”

“Of course you were!” I said cruelly, “for when a man who dreads ridicule as keenly as you do, *is* a fool, he is an *awful* one!”

Jimmie looked so worried that I was going on, but Bee interrupted me.

“I hereby serve notice on all of you that I have stood all I am going to from those two. I can bear up under real tribulation,” here she looked at Lyddy and Bob grinned cheerfully,

"but I cannot and will not submit to the society of the underbred."

"Right you are, Bee, me darlin'," said Bob, "only Dr. Bragg isn't underbred, he is underdone. He is *raw!*"

"He won't be underdone when I am through with him," said Bee quietly.

Whereat Laflin said simply,

"I am sorry."

And instantly we all became aware, as in a flash, that Laflin, too, was an outsider, if not exactly an alien.

We may not be perfect, we of The Happy Family, but we love ourselves, and our faults are just the sort of faults that we can bear with ease, if you allow us to make rude remarks occasionally. Therefore the hint of reproof from an outsider of one of us of the rank of our beloved Bee, made Jimmie and me lift our heads and look at each other with the same question in the eye of each.

"Shall we let Bee marry him?" we telegraphed.

Then we looked at the green inner light in Bee's eye and we smiled foolishly. We wouldn't be called upon to act, if she meant what that look said.

CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH BEE APPLIES A COUNTER IRRITANT

WHEN we separated that night we felt that things were brewing, so that when in a few days Bee summoned Jimmie and me to a star chamber session and left out both Aubrey and Mrs. Jimmie, we knew that something had happened.

Bee's very attitude seemed different as she met us, and at first I looked at her blacks to see if she had narrowed her bands of woe or gone into lavender. But her clothes were as immaculate, as self-restrained and as sombre as an English butler. It was her eye which had changed. In a flash, it came to us.

Bee was returning to her own! Her newly acquired holiness was dropping from her, as a garment, and we worthless ones welcomed her back to our midst with silent acclaim. It never does to cheer too loudly over Bee's returns until you know what they mean.

“Don't take off your things, Faith, because we are going over to your studio. Something has happened, or rather, will happen to-day.

Oh, don't look so frightened, silly! I only meant that Dr. Bragg got even with me for telling him that Mrs. Cox wasn't interested in his profession and telling her that I should think she would engage a foeman worthy of her steel, by telling the Munsons how you talked about him as a landlord, and — ”

“ Come on! ” cried Jimmie, putting his stick on the elevator bell and holding it there until it came up with a rush, ignoring all gentler signals.

He bundled us into the machine and we flew to my studio.

The moment we arrived, I saw that we were none too soon. It was in the air.

Bee, usually so polite, stepped ahead of me and walked to the double doors connecting our studio with Eleanor's. Blackman, the superintendent, was there, tinkering with the lock.

“ Has it come, Mr. Blackman? ” asked Bee, sweetly.

“ Has what come, Mrs. Lathrop? ” asked Blackman.

“ The load of bricks Mr. Jardine ordered to brick up these doors.”

Blackman laid down his keys and scratched his head.

“ I don't understand it, Mrs. Lathrop, ” he said. “ Has there been any trouble? Excuse

me for asking, but Mr. Munson has been something awful over the telephone all day. He gave orders to put a padlock on this door — ”

“ I suppose he had heard that my brother-in-law intended to do far more than that,” said Bee sweetly. “ You needn’t mind the padlock. We want it bricked up so that no sound can penetrate the wall. Work will begin on it at once. When Mr. Munson calls up again, please tell him that.”

With a smile of glee which plainly showed the low status the Munsons held with their all-powerful superintendent, Blackman took his leave.

Then Jimmie and I showed ourselves.

“ Have you really got the bricks, Bee?” asked Jimmie.

“ No,” said Bee, calmly. “ I knew you could get them for us.”

Bee’s manner of putting the impossible up to a man and confidently expecting him to compass it, is very flattering and always makes a hit with her victim.

Jimmie frowned a moment, then went to the telephone.

Bee and I sat on the table and waited.

“ Ju get ‘em?” I demanded when he returned.

“ They are coming up on hods now!” he

said with a grin. "The foreman in charge of the apartment house being built across the street — fellow by the name of Rafferty — used to work for me. I saw him this morning. By good luck I just caught him and he's lending me bricks, mortar and workmen for this job. It'll be done in a couple of hours."

"Jimmie," I said. "You are a wonder."

Jimmie beamed with pleasure at my compliment, whereupon I produced refreshments, and having seen my guests at their ease, I said:

"Now, please, Bee, may I know how this thing is coming out?"

"I haven't decided yet," she returned. "But one thing is certain. Now that the black flag has been raised, I propose to compel Munson to repair the wall of your bedroom before we consent to make up."

"Consent to make up!" I cried. "Do you think he will ever speak to us after seeing this?"

And I waved my hand at the bricks, which were beginning to arrive.

"I have calculated," said Bee, "that Blackman did not wait for Munson to telephone again. He called Munson and said we were bricking up the doors. Munson, being more curious than a dozen cats, will catch the first

train for town. It will take him two hours to get here. Therefore about five o'clock we shall see Munson's emotional silk hat and his nervous beard through that aperture which we now sit watching, and he will forget all about the vendetta in his curiosity to know what we got excited about to the extent of cutting off communication with him and his."

"If he comes, he'll be wild about having the wind taken out of his sails," said Jimmie, who occasionally betrays an astuteness which causes me to love him. "Munson has more vindictiveness than any man I know."

"He has more pride in his ability to hate *first* and get even *first*, than anything else," said Bee. "But like all children, he is quick to forget."

"And especially quick to forgive himself for having insulted you," I put in. "He says things he ought to be shot for, and then forgets all about them."

Bee smiled.

"I told you so," she said. "But you wouldn't believe me."

"Faith was too busy doing things for them to see flaws at first," said Jimmie. But observing my open-mouthed amazement at his praise, he hastily turned to Bee and said:

"However, commander of the faithful, I do

not see exactly how you are coming out on this deal — not that our poor feeble brains are capable of understanding such a Mike — Mike — What's the fellow's name, Faith?"

"Mike? Mike who?"

"That's just what I am asking you! You know! The fellow who laid plots. Mike — "

"Machiavelli!" I shrieked. "Mike! Anybody would think he was a hod carrier!"

"That's the chap. Mikeavelli! We may not be capable of understanding our young friend here, Mike Lathrop, but we would like a try at it."

"I think I have it," said Bee slowly. "I know one of Dr. Darlington's assistants. If he is *only* in!"

She went to the telephone and called up the Department of Health, while Jimmie and I still sat on the table and swung our feet and listened hopefully.

Presently Bee came back.

"I got him!" she said. "And he was just on his way up town and will stop here."

The bricklayers had begun their work. Jimmie directed it, with Rafferty's help, for Rafferty had to come over to see what it was all about.

"Now," said Bee, "when Dr. Lambertson comes, leave him entirely to me. Don't either

one of you put an oar in, no matter what you think."

We promised and Bee managed the young and good looking doctor from the Health Department as only our Bee could. I think Bee must have taken him in on the joke, for when they came down from inspecting the fungus on my bedroom wall, Dr. Lambertson joined us for a moment and watched the bricklayers with a broad grin on his face, in which was largely writ a great approval of the widow Lathrop and her nimble wit in planning such a coup.

Bee went to the elevator with him and I heard him say:

"Well, good-bye till Thursday. And be sure and let me know if I can be of the least further service to you, Mrs. Lathrop," when the elevator arrived and claimed him.

Bee came back, smiling her little conscious smile of having done a good job, and was in the act of relating to us what the doctor had said, when the return trip of the elevator brought Munson, his hair, beard and the nap of his tall hat all betraying nervous anxiety and an agitated curiosity.

He glanced in at our open front door as he passed, but hurried on, entered his own door

and appeared behind the bricklayers at the connecting doors of the two studios.

We looked up pleasantly and waited for him to begin.

“Pardon my intrusion,” he began, in a tone of honeyed sarcasm, “but may I inquire what architectural designs you seem to have planned upon my property?”

“It has been done to avoid unpleasantness, Mr. Munson. Please believe that, before we explain,” said Bee quickly.

She needn’t have hurried. I didn’t know what to say and neither did Jimmie.

“To avoid unpleasantness!” repeated Munson with delicate emphasis.

“Exactly,” said Bee softly. “Knowing, as we all do, upon what friendly terms Mrs. Jardine has always been with you, we naturally considered your feelings in the present unhappy situation, and closed communication between two families, both endowed with fluent conversational ability, before a final breach could occur.”

Munson stepped over the bricks in his feminine curiosity.

“The present unhappy situation!” he repeated. “May I inquire to what you refer?”

My teeth chattered for fear he would ask me.

Bee looked around vaguely.

"Is it possible," she murmured, "that even yet he does not know!"

This implied slur upon his intelligence brought the vain red into Munson's cheeks.

"I think I don't quite understand!" he said tentatively.

"It seems impossible that you should not," said Bee, "in which case I must explain."

Jimmie's eagerness to know too, caused him to take a step toward Bee, which brought a twitch to Bee's lips and a twitch to his coat tails from me, at which hint he came to himself and gazed nonchalantly at the ceiling.

"Your continued refusal to have the leak in Mrs. Jardine's bedroom repaired has been brought to the attention of the Board of Health, and I have here an order from the Commissioner — "

Munson's face flamed.

"I — I beg your pardon!" he stammered.
"I was not aware — I did not know — "

He stopped because of my look.

"It shall be attended to at once," he said.
"I will speak about it at the very next meeting of the Building Committee."

"And leave my sister to occupy a bedroom

with fungus on the walls two inches long?" inquired Bee. "Indeed, Mr. Munson, if I may take the liberty of saying so, you take a singular view of the length of time Mrs. Jardine intends to suffer in silence. Protests have already gone to the chairman of the Building Committee, signed by myself and Jimmie as witnesses and quoting this order from the Board of Health."

Munson laughed irritably.

"Mrs. Jardine's habit of suffering in silence is, indeed, well known to her admiring friends," said Munson sarcastically. "I happen to know that at a dinner party very recently, she publicly complained of her distress at having caught cold from sleeping in a damp bedroom and cast a slur upon me in my capacity as landlord."

"And I happen to know," retorted Jimmie, "that she did nothing of the kind. The slurs were cast by myself and Aubrey Jardine and Dr. Bragg — the very tattler who carried the gossip to you, Ed Munson — and what Faith said was that the delight of your conversation more than outweighed the dampness of a bedroom wall! But Faith always *is* the goat!"

"And I have always been," I burst out bitterly, "ever since I was ten years old!"

"And what were you before that?" sneered Munson.

"Before that I was nothing but a kid!" I answered.

We are a queer set and no mistake. There we were, "all het up" as Dr. Bragg would say, and fairly spoiling for a fight, literally falling into each other's arms over a foolish joke, which, one half second before it was uttered had been as far from my mind as the North Pole.

Munson's conduct, however, was the most amazing. He came up to me and offered his hand.

"I can never quarrel with a woman capable of that," he said, with a forgiving smile. "I must catch the five-forty back, so I must hurry. Have those bricks taken away and the leak will be attended to at once — to-morrow. By the way, may I have just a peg before I go? Thanks, awfully."

Jimmie attended to his wants and Munson pledged us fluently and gracefully in a little speech.

Then he sat down his glass, consulted his watch, took up his silk hat, shook hands with us all around regardless of the queer looks on our faces, and said good-bye.

He turned at the door and came back nervously rubbing his hat the wrong way.

"Oh, Eleanor begged me to say, Mrs. Jardine, that if you had no objection we would like to borrow the apartment from you next Friday and give a reception in your studio and a picture exhibit in ours — throwing the two together, of course. And — and — as most of our friends are not aware that we have unfortunately been obliged to sublet our studio, and know nothing of your tenancy, she begs to know if you will wear a hat and come in at the street door like any other guest!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ELEANOR'S RECEPTION AND WHAT CAME OF IT

I HAVE felt foolish before, but I never felt a completer idiot than I did at Eleanor Munson's reception in my studio, walking around all the afternoon, clad in my best and wearing hat and gloves.

I sternly refused to come in from the street in the middle of the afternoon, and send in my card as she wanted me to do. I was there when the thing started and to the earliest guest I appeared already placed.

My sense of humour or my common sense, if you please, simply wouldn't let me go out of my way to make a fool of myself. I am never one to think myself the only person to possess a brain, and on this occasion I give even the wayfaring man credit for the possibility of putting two and two together and arriving at the conclusion that they make four, even if the Munsons did continue to ejaculate five and six as the proper answer to the question of the afternoon.

How did they know how many persons

knew the apartment was mine and wondered at the change of hostesses?

But no. They even bore in silence the comments of their intimates on the amount of new furniture (ours) they had bought since their last inspection, and thus they carried off, by a superiority or effrontery or fluke of luck, a situation which would have had me grovelling in the dust and choking with eager and unnecessarily fluent explanations to total and indifferent strangers.

But the Munsons had no sense of humour. I decided it finally that afternoon. Eleanor had only an intellectual appreciation of it in others, and Munson had an understanding of the ridiculous and a cynical wit which often passed for humour. But Munson's witticisms generally left a fine line of blood behind them, like the scratches of a playful cat.

Bee was there in a costume of subdued woe which made every woman there willing to go into mourning, if they could only hope to equal her get-up. It represented The Widow Beginning to Take Notice in a living picture.

Bob Mygatt was there too, and Laflin Van Tassel and Mrs. Keep and the Jimmies, and our dear Lyddy and Hope Loring and her husband, Cedric Hamilton, and Sallie and Norman Fitzhugh and Lord and Lady Abernethy.

I was in the act of trying to get Patricia to let Eleanor paint her portrait when Jimmie and Aubrey overheard me, and separated us as quickly and quietly as if we had been about to spring at each other's throats.

But Bee, who generally revelled in receptions and such like, scarcely spoke, unless addressed. She even ignored Laflin's presence almost to the point of avoidance, while as for Laflin, he stood off in a corner and followed her every movement with his eyes.

I thought to give matters an onward fillip on my own account by stirring Lyddy up to naming the happy day the very moment Bob got his divorce, and my opportunity came at Eleanor's reception and at the supper afterward, which happened in this wise.

Jimmie came up and whispered in my ear :
"Come up in the balcony with me quick.
Got some great news for you!"

When we were alone, we hid behind the palms, where nobody could see us, but where we could see everybody in the studio, and then Jimmie said :

"Know what's the matter with Bee?"
"No, what?"
"See that girl walking around by herself —
the one with an Orange County fruit farm on
her hat?"

"Yes, who is it?"

"Her name is Laura Clyde. She is after Laflin Van Tassel hot foot and she told Sallie Fitzhugh she was engaged to him. I accidentally overheard Sallie telling Bee — honest, it was accidental! You needn't look at me like that! And how could I have told you if I hadn't overheard?"

"Do you suppose she really is, or is that a ruse of hers to touch Bee's pride and induce her to draw off?"

"Exactly my own conclusions!" cried Jimmie. "She isn't the real thing and I don't believe Laflin is taken in. But he is a godly young person and this Miss Laura Clyde is fishing for him with religious angle-worms, so to speak."

"So," I said, "so that's what's been the matter with Bee for the last few weeks! I wonder how it will turn out!"

"You wonder, do you? Well, I'll tell you how it will turn out. If Bee finds out that it is true and isn't prepared to give up the chase she will manage things so that Laflin will jump his trolley. She won't let him get away, nor she won't turn pious to please him. She tried it for a while, but it bored our charming young widow to the verge of extinction. Didn't you hear her serve notice on us the other night?"

Bee simply 'won't be put upon,' as our gentle domestics have it. And if I mistake not the signs, Bee is going to fire her first gun this blessed day."

"What makes you think so?"

"Cuz she asked me and Mary and Laflin to stay a few minutes after everybody goes."

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. "I'll order in a few things and we'll have a little supper instead of dinner."

"Turn me loose in the kitchen, Faith, and I'll make a cup," said Jimmie, diving for his coat and hat. "And—and, Faith! One minute! As you can't use either of these telephones, you'd better let me order the supper!"

Verily this seemed to be my day to entertain by proxy!

I let Jimmie out at the mezzanine door and sought out Bee.

"Jimmie has just gone out to order a little supper sent in," I murmured, "and I think I'll ask Bob and Laflin to stay. Do you want anybody else?"

Bee's face lighted up as if by magic.

"The very thing!" she said, catching my wrist. "Ask Eleanor's friend, Miss Clyde, and Lyddy."

"Lyddy! Oh, Bee, must I?"

"You must! Don't kick! And the Munsions! Oh, this is almost too good to be true!"

"What is?"

"Faith, don't ask any questions, but help me as only you will know how to, when the time comes!"

"You mean — Miss Clyde?"

"How did you know?" asked Bee. "But I'm glad you do, for I rather feel that I am dealing with an unknown quantity in that young woman."

"If you want my opinion," I said bluntly, "this Miss Clyde is what old Mary would call 'a little blister!' But I'll help — no matter what she is."

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH BEE SURMOUNTS ANOTHER OBSTACLE

JIMMIE'S supper on my china in the studio, borrowed from me for the day by the Munsons, was a great success.

Only Aubrey accidentally spoiled things some by saying:

"In some ways, my wife is like a man. She always remembers that men want to eat even after a lady's reception. At home, my mother never had dinner on the days she gave luncheons or teas. She always said she wasn't hungry."

I ought to have kept still, but I blurted out:

"I regret to be obliged to tell you, dear, that this is Jimmie's supper!"

"It was your idea, wasn't it, you,—you—" Jimmie hesitates to call me names right out, but his face was red with embarrassment under his wife's approving glances.

Ever since we had had to borrow money, Jimmie has used every effort to contribute to

our support, short of abstracting our bills from the postman and sending them back receipted.

Mrs. Keep smiled her slow smile under which Jimmie writhed helplessly. Jimmie sickens and droops under public approval and only thrives on abuse.

Wherefore he always enjoys the best of health in my vicinage.

I have never seen Bee so — well, so alive as she was that night. She seemed like a luminous live wire, but I could not understand why she and Bob exchanged glances occasionally, which were replete with secret understanding. Was it because they were both in bondage to circumstance and applying their wits to an extrication which would seem to the lay mind an impossibility?

I managed to whisper to Bob during the evening :

“ How is it that you and Bee understand each other so well? What is this wireless code of signals you have adopted? ”

Bob laughed.

“ There is no code, Highness. Bee and I understand each other by the same token that you and I do — the bond of iniquity — submerged iniquity, which binds criminals of the higher class together. You understand me just in proportion to your own wickedness and you

love me because of your sense of humour. If it wasn't for that you'd hate me. But don't ever hate me, Faith," added the idiot passionately, "or I'll die!"

As he carefully raised his voice during this last speech so that Lyddy could not fail to hear him, I could have slapped him.

And as she reared her head and slowly grew majenta, Bob snickered.

Fortunately Munson saved the situation just here by asking for another whiskey and soda. As it was his third Eleanor shot him a warning glance, to which he replied aloud, as is the custom of some husbands when in pursuit of their third.

Bee endeavoured to seat Miss Clyde next to Laflin, but that astute young woman with an ease which baffled my sister's best efforts chose a place opposite to him, whereupon Bee established herself as far away from them both as possible and evidently counted on me as a scout to circle around and make reports.

Miss Clyde was a remarkable looking girl even in this day of a fashion by which the most ordinary may make themselves conspicuous. She was very pretty, having loose curling strands of her hair hanging down on either side of her face and blowing across her forehead.

It sounds horrid to describe it, but it was artistic and effective on her. Her empire gown hung loosely on her slim figure. Her great hat, which she refused to remove, shadowed her face. Her lace sleeves wrinkled on her slender, rounded arms and came over her thin hands to her heavily ringed fingers.

She made a striking and effective picture, except that her eyes were queer. They were a clear green and she seldom opened them wide. She kept them narrowed and she peered at people out of these green slits like a sleepy cat.

They were not pretty, but no one who ever looked at them, failed to look again and yet again, and sometimes people seemed able to look nowhere else when she was around.

She fastened these compelling eyes of hers on Laflin the moment we were seated, and although he vainly endeavoured to refuse to respond, he found himself yielding more and more to their spell.

It was Jimmie who blurted out at one end of the table :

“ I do believe she’s trying to hypnotize him ! ”

It shocked most of us who heard. Only Eleanor Munson showed her utter unconcern and lack of responsibility to anybody, by remarking indifferently :

"I've been told she can do it as completely as a professional. It would be rather amusing to see it demonstrated on some one we know, wouldn't it?"

"I think it would be horrid!" I answered.

Eleanor smiled her slow, superior, irritating smile which the self-conscious artist bestows on the rest of the world.

"You know I do not believe in the ethics of things as vehemently as you do," she said quietly.

"What do you believe in?" I asked.

"I believe in reaching out and taking whatever one wants in this world, which could possibly add to one's happiness," she replied.

"Regardless of the rights of others?" asked Bee.

"Rights of others is a relative term," she answered. "Everything has been stolen from somebody else first. What I regard as my rights to-day, possibly I appropriated from another a week ago. No man ever married and became the legal property of one woman who did not belong, in the eyes of some other woman, to her, morally or ethically or whatever you choose to call it. Therefore the words 'my rights' depend upon who speaks them. Which brings me back to my original statement."

Laura Clyde was evidently a companion spirit of Eleanor Munson's, as well as her guest, for she overheard the latter part of these remarks and looked at us.

Bob, who always scented mischief a mile away, asked deferentially:

"Did you hear that, Miss Clyde, and do you agree?"

"Oh, no," purred the girl, narrowing her eyes at Laflin. "I have no desire to appropriate the property of another woman. I might—" here she looked squarely at Bee—"I might dispute her rights. I might lay plans to circumvent a rival, but I would never fight a losing game."

My sister regarded this extraordinary girl attentively. She showed no vexation nor apprehension, but like a good general she was learning the enemy's tactics.

"Oh," moaned Bob, "how I wish you girls would squabble about me. I hate to have such divinely interesting possibilities even mentioned regarding another fellow, when I am so near at hand and so worthy of your observation, your attentions—I may say, of your love!"

"I should think," said Lyddy acidly, "that you had had about enough of women squabbling over you!"

This was a bomb sure enough, for Lyddy had never before dared to bait Bob.

He did not even turn his head in her direction, but his very ears grew hot as the blood rose.

Then began poor Lyddy's punishment, for Bob drew his chair close to Miss Clyde's and for half an hour he murmured idiotic love to her, carefully raising his voice whenever there was a chance of Lyddy's hearing.

The girl answered in kind, but every ardent word she spoke, she directed not at Bob, but at Laflin Van Tassel, nor for one moment did she remove the green, sleepy gleam of her compelling eyes from his face.

This double game seemed to fascinate Bob, for he flung himself more and more ardently into it, until I decided that it was time to relieve the tension.

I have said before that I hate to hear open love-making, and for a few moments, I cast vainly about for a way to punish Bob for his evening's work.

Suddenly I thought of Lyddy, and when no one was observing me, I slipped into a vacant chair beside her.

"Lyddy," I whispered, "I hate to hear Bob talking like this, for after all, you know he is engaged to you — he is really your prop-

erty. Yet you heard Miss Clyde say she would go after any man she wanted and get him away from her rival — ”

I really did not look for so much success. At my half expressed idea Lyddy clutched my arm and turned purple in the face.

“ Faith,” she gasped. “ Faith! Help me to get him out of it, and I’ll do anything in the world you want me to! I’ll — I’ll make you a present — a handsome present! I’ll even go so far — ”

“ You’ve gone far enough, Lyddy!” I said severely. “ I’ll help you for nothing, if you’ll only keep quiet. Let me think! How long is it before Bob’s wife can get her divorce?”

“ The six months will be up on the 20th of April, and it is now the 29th of March.”

“ Three weeks,” I said. “ Well, get Bob to consent to be married about the first of May and then promise to take him abroad if he will give up this promiscuous love-making. It is dangerous, Lyddy.”

Again she gasped.

“ I will,” she whispered. “ I will! I’ll have it out with him to-night. I’ll never forget that you suggested helping me, Faith Jardine! I don’t believe I ever understood you before. Perhaps I have done you an injustice in my thoughts.”

I did a little gasping on my own account just here.

To think of stiff-necked old Lyddy acknowledging that she might be in the wrong! Perhaps I had not always done her justice, and not to be outdone in courtesy, I hastened to say so.

But she scarcely heard me. She was watching Bob, who had twitched his chair closer to Miss Clyde's and was now whispering to her.

Laflin watched her in fascinated silence, until suddenly she leaned slightly forward and said:

“I am very tired. I must go.”

Instantly he replied to her as if she had commanded him:

“May I take you home?”

The girl smiled and turning her head sideways, she shot a look of bright malice at Bee.

Again my sister controlled herself.

People got up and the Munsons prepared to go. They were to spend the night with friends in town.

Miss Clyde came to say good-night. She spoke first to me, then she turned to Bee.

“Good-night,” she said. “We can never be friends, because we both want the same man and I expect to get him, even if I have to propose to him myself.”

Although Miss Clyde lowered her voice so that the men could not hear, Bee, Eleanor Munson and I heard distinctly. I looked instinctively to see Eleanor repudiate such vulgarity, but she only smiled her aloof smile and said:

“She is a direct little pagan, isn’t she?”

And with a careless glance around the studio, she remarked that it had been rather a nice afternoon and went.

As the door closed behind her party, Bee murmured fiercely in my ear:

“Not one pitying look from you! I am a match for her. Burst out laughing, stupid! I’m going to!”

And she laughed so close to my ear that I jumped and bit my tongue.

But Bee was able to control not only others but herself — a far more difficult task, from my point of view. And she was the life of the party until everybody left, whereupon she kissed me in a tired way and the Jimmies took her home, together with Lyddy and Bob.

It must have been two weeks later when Bee next spoke to me of Laura Clyde.

In the meantime Bee had never once sent for Laflin even when she needed to see him on business about the new house, which was now being built. When she needed him, she

wrote what she wanted and sent him out alone. All the opportunities for being in his society she pointedly neglected.

Finally one morning she showed me the following extraordinary letter.

“Read this,” she said. “It is from Miss Clyde, and tell me what you think of it.”

“Dear Mrs. Lathrop,” it ran. “You will not be in the least surprised to receive this letter, because, after what I said to you the last time we met, you will have been waiting to hear from me.

“I did just what I said I would. I asked him to marry me, and I’ve never heard anything quite so awkward and painful and absurd as he was in the way he refused me.

“For refuse me he did, and I feel that you have a right to know it for the game way you have left the field clear to me.

“Perhaps it was your very gameness which hurried me into precipitancy. I was getting on, and perhaps, if I had waited, I could have got him. But I don’t know.

“It may interest you to know how I managed to get him out of your toils with such apparent ease and celerity. I was in the pergola at Coolmeath when you made your famous *volte face* on the subject of architecture and I told him about it.

“ It will give you some work to get around his suspicion of your sincerity, but as my engagement to another man will be announced Sunday, this will help you — if you need help, which I doubt.

“ Only one word more, which believe me, I offer in the friendliest spirit.

“ You are going to have trouble in making him propose, because he is simply a mass of putty, with only an imitation spine.

“ Good-bye and good luck. The bank-roll of the man I got is not so wide as a church door, nor so deep as a well, but 'twill serve.

“ Very sincerely yours,
“ LAURA CLYDE.”

I dropped my hands helplessly at my side when I finished, and Bee took the letter from my nerveless fingers and held it carefully with the tongs over the gas log.

“ Well,” she said tentatively.

“ Well,” I repeated, “ that's the most curious thing I ever read. It's a human document, but somehow, in spite of its frankness, it seems not as revolting as it should, because it's so sportsman like!”

“ She didn't care for him at all,” said Bee. “ I was afraid, at first, she did.”

“ Do you?” I exclaimed suddenly.

Then, for the first time in my life, I saw my sister's face flush with honest feeling.

"Why, Bee!" I cried. "I didn't know! I rather thought —"

"It was, at first," answered Bee. "Then I got to know him and I found that it would have been the same even if he hadn't had a cent."

"But don't you think part of what this girl said is true? He is vacillating and *I* think he is soft."

Bee leaned forward.

"Do you remember James?" she said. "I have had one husband of firm will, unbending purpose and strong determination. I think now I will take my chance with one where influence counts for something. Poor James! I think one reason for my great unhappiness with him was because my one characteristic—the one you and Jimmie make such a fuss about—my ability to handle people and circumstances, was entirely lost on such material as James. It wore me out to try to influence him, so I gave it up. With Laflin, it will be easy."

"Then you think —" I began dubiously.

Bee smiled.

"I think that in the year this poor man has been a millionaire, he has been more run after than anyone I ever knew in my life. I shall be obliged to go carefully, but —"

I smiled at the triumphant note in her voice. What if, after all, her plans should miscarry?

"How about his suspicions of your sincerity about the house? You told me he thought you were going to live there, but that you meant to rent it."

"I know," said Bee. "But I have fully decided to furnish and live in it."

"But won't you hate that? Its divine beauty never did appeal to you."

"He loves it so, that if — when we are married, I mean, he would probably have insisted on living there anyway, so I'll simply begin to order decorations and furniture, which will refute his suspicions without a word from me."

"But Bee, that's, of course, terribly clever, but how you will hate living in that isolated place!"

Bee smiled.

"I sha'n't mind it for a while!"

"But suppose he wants to stay!"

"He won't," smiled Bee. "Things will happen. They always do. *He* will suggest moving!"

Yea, verily!

"Well," I said. "I can only repeat Laura Clyde's words, 'Good-bye and good luck to you!'"

CHAPTER XX

PLANS

ICAN never understand why I am to blame for everything which is, as Bob says, "moral but distasteful," but the fact remains that Bob blames me for his having at last been driven to bay and having to marry Lyddy.

I think he had rather hoped to go for a year, or possibly more, in a state of engaged freedom, pensioned and happy, but I, who never look in more than one direction, before I leap (which accounts for an occasional landing in mud puddles, up to my knees), had, in order to punish him, urged Lyddy to get Bob out of his shocking probation.

Nor can I yet see that I did wrong. Bob had no business to be left free to make love to every woman he saw.

And I said so, when he accused me.

"I was a free man when I entered into that ill-starred flirtation, queen of my heart, and

although I have seldom enjoyed anything more than the sight of Lyddy's angel face while I was making love to that little Miss Clyde of Laflin's, yet, owing to your interference, Lyddy nailed me for the role of Benedict on May first. Just think of it! I'm to be queen of the May, mother, I'm to be queen of the May! If you are awake, will you call me early?"

He made a wry face, got up, dropped his cigar into the rose-jar, lighted a cigarette and then continued:

"I don't like it, Ladybird! I tell you, I don't want to marry. I didn't even want to marry Ava. I just like to be engaged. An engagement has privileges and no responsibilities!"

"Bob Mygatt!" I began explosively.

But Bob hurriedly interrupted me.

"Did you know that Ava and Shupe are married?" he asked hastily.

"No! Are they?"

"Married! And Shupe has re-written 'our' play, 'The Alligator Pear Tree,'—ruining it, to my mind, but still he has got an 'angel' to produce it, and I suppose it will make a hit!"

"Did you give the play back to him?" I asked.

Bob nodded.

"Without any string to it?" I demanded suspiciously.

Bob looked at me reproachfully.

"How you do suspect one!" he murmured.

"But did you?"

"Don't stamp your foot at me like that, White Princess! You scare me so I can't talk. Well then, I did retain a ten per cent. interest in it, on account of all my work on it. The thing was rotten when I took it!"

"'Took it' is good!" I said scathingly.
"When you *stole* it!"

Bob's face flushed such an agonized red that I immediately repented my brutality. It's funny how sensitive dishonourable people are. Now if I had been able to get my own consent to steal that play, you could have called me a thief quite openly, and the verbal statement of my deliberately dishonourable act would not have added one whit to my discomfort.

Not so Bob. He was deeply sensitive — over having been caught — and my mention of it pained him in his tenderest conceit.

"Oh, well," he said finally, "it's all in a life time, and the only reason you get blamed for everything is because you are always so ready and eager to jump into any fight going on — no matter what it's all about — and so

gloriously willing to take sides. I think it is bully myself."

"It may be bully," I said, smiling to think what a lot of fun I have had fighting with Jimmie, "but I get into heaps of trouble by it."

"I am always in trouble," said Bob cheerfully. "Just now I am worried to death wondering what my fair Lyddy will wear the day she leads me to the altar — handcuffed to a couple of deputy sheriffs. She does lean to such courageous colours! I wonder if you or — "

"I am no good at a thing of that kind. Bee is your party. Tell your troubles to her. If I attempted it, it would get into the papers!"

"Right you are!" he said, throwing his cigarette stub into the fern dish, whence I carefully took it and threw it — not into his face, as I felt like doing and said so — but into an ash tray. "I'll ask Bee."

He stood up to go and started to kiss my hand, when he happened to think of something else.

"Get on your things and come with me," he suggested. "Then if my darling financier is there too and I can't get a word with Bee, you can tell her."

It isn't far to Bee's, and when we got there,

Bee was making faces into the telephone transmitter and talking spasmodically with her eyes closed.

Then we heard her say:

“ Well, come on over. I’m all alone. That is to say, only Bob and Faith are here.”

“ Well, of all the nerve!” murmured Bob. “ Evidently we don’t count as much as a two-spot. We only take up room, *we do!*”

Bee laughed as she hung up the receiver.

“ Who was it?” I demanded.

“ Hope Loring in a fit over a flirtation Mrs. Cox is having with Jermyn. She says Cedric only laughs at her fears, but she wants it put a stop to, and I think I am just the one who can help her out.”

Bee’s eyes are gray when she is at peace with the world. They were green on this occasion, and I could see that she had some neat plan in mind to settle the affair of the slain rose on the one hand and to spike the guns of a sister-widow on the other.

I didn’t particularly envy Mrs. Cox or Dr. Bragg at that moment.

“ Hope may make her mind easy,” said Bob, “ Mrs. Cox has no intention of marrying Jermyn. He’s too poor. By the same token Dr. Bragg is also safe — safer than he wants to be — the old ninny!”

Presently Hope came in, radiant in the smart clothes brides find one of the perquisites of marriage, and looking quite lovely.

Her sister, Sallie Fitzhugh, was with her, and Bob at once began to reproach both sisters with having married before they had fully considered his attractions, and causing Hope to flush gloriously with the way he called her Mrs. Hamilton.

But he was not allowed to distract their attention from their main anxiety, for Hope, in her straightforward, boyish way, plunged into the heart of the matter, sweeping all conventional lukewarmness aside as if positive of our sympathy and interest.

“Jermyn is so inexperienced and widows are so clever,” groaned Hope, entirely forgetting that Bee, into whose face she was gazing, was also one of the class she condemned so sweepingly.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lathrop!” she cried realizing her mistake. “I forgot you were one! Now, if I am not careful, I’ll go on and say ‘but you are not clever like Mrs. Cox,’ and so I’ll simply make a bad matter worse! But you know what I mean, don’t you?”

Hope’s tone contained an agonized appeal which Bee could not resist.

"I do!" she said with conviction.

"And you know this Mrs. Cox?" asked Hope.

Bee's tone was fervent and replete with feeling as she admitted that she knew the other widow.

Bob leaned back in the window seat and nursed his knee with an expression of enjoyment on his face which only appeared when two or more human beings were about to fly at each other's throats. At such times, Bob's eagerness to help either combatant along was truly touching.

"What makes you think Jermyn is interested in Mrs. Cox?" I asked.

"Because he won't let me say a word against her. He says she is innocent and sincere and never encourages men to make love to her like most wid—"

Hope stopped abruptly and clapped her hands over her mouth.

"Oh, what is the matter with me?" she moaned. "I am here in your house, asking you to help me and insulting you in every second word!"

"Don't mind!" I said. "Bee isn't like other widows. Her methods are entirely her own. You could never mix her work with that

of any other unattached female. It's so different."

Bob writhed and Bee bit her lip.

"Do you know a Dr. Bragg?" she asked.

"I've met him," said Hope. "Beastly old party!" she added frankly.

"You must give a dinner and bring Jermyn face to face with Mrs. Cox and Dr. Bragg," said Bee.

"Must I?" said Hope, doubtfully. "I don't like Dr. Bragg and Cedric says he is a bounder."

"Th—that's just what he is!" stammered Bob. "But I want to be there to see the fun. Invite me, Mrs. Hamilton! Please do!"

"I'll see about it," said Hope, wrinkling her pretty nose, as she thought of Lyddy. "I'll make up a party for — can you all come two weeks from to-night?"

Bob's face fell.

"That's the day of my funeral," he said. "It's May first! Have you all forgotten?"

"Well, why not?" said Bee, eagerly. "It would be all the more of an excuse. Give them a bridal dinner, Hope. They can be married at five o'clock and sail the next day."

"Suit yourselves!" said Bob carelessly.

"As long as it's got to be done, I don't care how it's handled."

"Can you make Miss Lathrop agree?" asked Sallie Fitzhugh.

"Can he?" I cried. "She's so tame, she'll eat out of his hand."

"Bark, roll over and play dead," added Bob gravely. "I've trained her myself."

Hope jumped up and shook out her chiffons.

"Then it's all settled. I can only have twelve, because I only got my wedding silver in dozens."

"You needn't invite us," said Sallie, "because we are going to Lakewood Sunday to be gone a week."

"I want the Jimmies — "

"And us? Can't we come?" I begged. I wouldn't have missed it for worlds.

"You bet you can," said Hope. "I'll need you. Tell Mrs. Jimmie not to make any other engagement until I can get my cards out."

"Don't you worry," I said. "Jimmie would break an engagement to die and go to heaven for a chance to see Bee lock horns with Mrs. Cox."

"I'll ask Laflin," said Hope suddenly, whereat Bee crimsoned and Bob stuffed a pliable sofa pillow into his mouth.

I came away with Hope and Sallie, leaving

Bob to talk to Bee about Lyddy's choice of a bridal gown.

"Hope," I said, as our ways parted, "make up your mind for warm work at your dinner. You are going to see two widows at their best!"

CHAPTER XXI

LYDDY'S FIRST AND BOB'S SECOND WEDDING

MUCH to Lyddy's horror, Bob insisted upon being married on Friday, and as they were to sail on Saturday, he had a reasonable excuse.

"The worse the day, the worse the deed," he observed gloomily. "I only wish I had thought of it and I'd have been married on Good Friday. Last year three murderers were put to death on that day."

Nevertheless, under Jimmie's cheering reminders that Lyddy was going to take him to London for the season, then for a yachting cruise, then for a motoring trip, winding up with Monte Carlo, where she had agreed to stake Bob for the high play he had always longed to indulge in, Bob revived.

I noticed that Jimmie's manner was peculiar, as he was painting the delights which lay before the bride and groom of European travel with almost unlimited means.

We all knew that Jimmie had been particularly fortunate in business of late, for Mrs.

Jimmie was fairly radiant over a pearl necklace which Jimmie had managed to get into an eggshell and served to her on Easter morning as if it were a soft boiled egg.

Aubrey's play had been produced in Plainfield and had scored a success, but as no theatre was available on Broadway, the managers decided to hold its New York production over until September, so we had an empty summer on our hands and no fixed plans.

This, however, did not disturb us, as plans only annoy us and hamper our freedom.

Jimmie, on the contrary, likes to plan, even if he changes his mind every day.

For another thing, he had come to like Bob more and more and to make allowances for his obvious faults. I think he felt that Bob was getting all that was coming to him in marrying Lyddy, and that it ill behooved us to play the part of avenging angels and rub it in any more. So that on Friday, May first, Bob's wedding day and the day of Hope Hamilton's farewell dinner to the bridal pair, Jimmie and Bob were on the most amicable terms.

Although Lyddy wanted a white satin wedding, Bob and Bee finally chloroformed her into a lavender crepe, heavily embroidered with silver bullion, which looked better on her than anything she had ever worn.

She also wanted bridesmaids and flower girls, but Bob put his foot down.

“ ‘Tis not decent,” he told Aubrey and me, “here I am a newly made grass-widower, with the sod still sticking to me. I haven’t been a free man more than twenty minutes by the clock, and for Lyddy to want to take the funeral baked meats to furnish forth the wedding table is not in good form. Besides, I don’t choose to have you four gibbering idiots snickering at my misery from the pews. I wish we could be married by a registrar and put the announcement in that I once read in a western paper — ‘So and So was married yesterday afternoon to So and So. No cards. No cake. No pie. Nobody’s damned business!’ ”

We cheered him as best we could.

They were married from Bee’s apartment by the same clergyman who had buried James.

This was Lyddy’s contribution to the general cheerfulness of the occasion. But Bee, whose gleaming eyes could not help betraying the joy she felt at being for ever rid of her incubus, would not refuse Lyddy anything, on this, her supreme day, so there was not even a remonstrance from poor Bee, whose patience under Lyddy’s final tortures was most beautiful.

Lyddy had been a fiend for the last few

weeks. Instead of being softened by her new joy, she seemed alive to the incongruity of the whole affair, and, as if suspecting all that we were thinking, she took it out on all of us, as if we had voiced our every thought.

But for Bee's sake we abstained from an open break, consoling ourselves with the thought that this was the end.

It was in such a temper that we gathered in Bee's tiny drawing-room to see them married.

I was so nervous that I was shaking like a leaf, and Aubrey actually had to hold one of my hands to enable me to bear up under it.

"Be calm," he whispered to me whimsically, "you needn't take it so hard. Remember it's not you who are marrying Bob."

I smiled faintly, but I was not enjoying myself.

Bob kept his eye nervously on the rug during the first part of the ceremony, and everything was going all right, until they came to the part where Bob had to say:—

"And with all my worldly goods I thee endow," whereupon the graceless scamp looked directly at Jimmie and me and winked.

"Ah-gah!" observed Jimmie in a loud tone. It was not a sneeze, not a cough, but a cross between the two, and instantly the blight of grippe seemed to descend upon the entire com-

pany, for such a session of sneezing and coughing seldom graces any occasion where snuff is not also present. Or hay fever.

Bob was delighted. He straightened up and made the final responses in a firm, composed tone. He saluted his bride bravely. He accepted our congratulations with fortitude. It made him master of the occasion.

We toasted the bridal couple in champagne, then hurried home to dress for dinner, and at eight o'clock we gathered at the Cedric Hamiltons' for one of the most amazing spectacles of modern drawing-room warfare.

CHAPTER XXII

TWO WIDOWS AND THEIR WORK

IF the great game of life were simply a husband-hunt, it could not have been better illustrated than at Hope's dinner, where sat Lyddy and Bob, representing the woman who boldly outbid another woman for a husband and got what she paid for; Mrs. Cox, who represented the Anne Whitefields of this world — women who reach out and grab the man they want; and Bee, the artist, Bee the dainty angler, Bee, the Perfect Widow!

When I said to Jimmie that Bee was in my opinion the Perfect Widow, Jimmie said that was going some, for widows are perforce the most kittle of female cattle.

Nevertheless, besides her art, the work of Mrs. Cox was coarse and crude. Mrs. Cox evidently accepted the fact that Jermyn Loring's sister had invited her to dine in this intimate fashion and had sent her in on Jermyn's arm, to indicate that she was a satisfactory candidate in the eyes of a family notoriously fastidious.

I may be conceited — Jimmie says I am — but in Mrs. Cox's place I never could have made such a crass mistake.

I would have asked myself a few common-sense questions before my mirror, as, for example, what there was to recommend a forty-year-old widow of small means and few attractions to a handsome, athletic, college graduate, in business for himself, and with his father and mother and two beautiful sisters, unmistakably in the best society which New York can boast.

But some women seem strangely over-confident. They are able to look themselves squarely in the face and then bet on themselves in a way to make an honest gambler turn pale.

Sallie Fitzhugh would have been invaluable that evening, for Sallie is a born diplomat and can face down a most complicated situation, while poor Hope, who is still only a bewitching, grown-up child, more boy than girl, only kept her agonized eyes on Jermyn and Mrs. Cox until Bob, who sat at her right, mercifully took her mind off her misery and made a fool of himself in a noble cause.

Lyddy was gorgeously clad. Bee's artist hand was visible in her every costume. She had changed her wedding gown for a black

gauze dinner dress, trimmed in Persian embroidery with much colour and iridescence in it. It had butterflies which stood out and trembled and flashed their wings in the light. Her fan and slippers were made to match and a jewelled butterfly on a spiral was in her hair, so that old Lyddy really looked wonderfully well and Bob looked as if he could have kissed Bee for making her so.

The dinner went along as usual for the first half hour, Bob and Cedric Hamilton discussing the relative merits of French and Italian automobiles.

Dr. Bragg having been carefully placed, at Bee's suggestion, directly opposite Mrs. Cox and Jermyn, much to that widow's obvious annoyance, gobbled his food with his customary robust appetite and then, having satisfied the first evident pangs of hunger, he had leisure to observe the methods of his lady love, which he proceeded to do in a manner fairly primitive in its barbarism.

Jermyn's head was close to the widow's, and she was whispering to him behind her fan.

Dr. Bragg is large of bone, large of body, clumsy of finger and thick of ankle. Therefore when he writhes in his chair, the joints of said chair groan. When he fidgets with his hands, he drops things.

The butler had already picked up two forks and given him another salt cellar for the one he had upset, when Mrs. Cox came another inch out of her low cut dinner gown and deliberately pressed Jermyn's hand as he restored her dropped handkerchief.

We all saw it, but nobody groaned aloud except the doctor. He fairly bellowed in his pain.

It was a sound no one could pass over in silence, so we all looked at him. His forehead was red and beaded with drops of sheer agony.

"What is the matter, doctor? Are you ill?" asked Mrs. Cox in icy accents.

"No — no, dear! I am not ill!" stammered the wretched man.

Jermyn turned and looked at Mrs. Cox.

"Why does that man call you 'dear?'" he asked quietly.

"I — I don't know!" murmured Mrs. Cox. Then recovering herself, she said: "I didn't notice that he did. But it is a little way of his to call women he likes such names! Isn't it, doctor?"

"It is not!" he roared. "And you know it!"

If Mrs. Jimmie had kept still, the thing would not have ended there, but in her dear, gentle way, she restored a harmony which

none of us wanted to see restored, by saying in her kindest manner :

“ Doctors do so much good in this world, it is no wonder that they are sometimes overwrought and nervous. You have been working very continuously, haven’t you, doctor? ”

Everybody avoided looking at everybody else. Jimmie stared hard at the end of his cigarette, but his smile slowly widened and finally he met my eye.

We never think of taking Mrs. Jimmie into any of our little plots — first, because she wouldn’t understand them; secondly, because she would disapprove of them, and thirdly, because she so seldom upsets them that it is an unnecessary precaution.

This was one of the exceptions which proved the rule.

But Jermyn was clever. And he was a Loring, one of a family noted for their loyalty to each other. He had been annoyed by the remarks of his sisters about Mrs. Cox, nevertheless he had been cautioned by them more than he had been willing to admit. He knew that both Sallie and Hope adored him and had no thought in mind but his own welfare and happiness. Furthermore, he had what many a brother would be better off if he cul-

tivated, and that is, a belief that a clever woman's estimate of another woman is sure to come true in the long run.

He had been sadly upset by his sisters' attacks on Mrs. Cox, but he was under the spell of her fascinations, and there comes a time in every boy's life when an older woman fills his imagination in a way no pretty girl can hope to rival.

Jermyn was in this stage when his sister's famous Rescue Dinner began, but I could see that Dr. Bragg's evident agony over Mrs. Cox's flirtatious manner and the widow's secret annoyance, which became every moment more obvious, were not unobserved by the young man. Consequently my opinion of him rose in leaps and bounds. I have so long cherished a rooted conviction that men in love were hopeless fools that this evidence on Jermyn's part to look before he leaped, gave me much joy.

This time the tables seemed to be turned. Ordinarily it is the woman who observes the small signs and goes cautiously, and the man who loses his head and rushes to his doom. But the more Jermyn observed Dr. Bragg's nervous and troubled mien; the more he listened to the doctor's endeavours to attract Mrs. Cox's attention; the more pronounced grew

that lady's snubs to the long-suffering man, the more Jermyn withdrew into his shell and the more ardently the widow went after him.

Hope's eyes were sparkling in triumph along about the salad, but as for me, I had so many other distractions that I lost track of that affair every once in a while, in my acute interest in the others.

Laflin had never been so pronounced in his attentions to Bee as he was that night. Hope had sent him in with Bee, and the manner of both Hope and Cedric indicated that Laflin's choice met with their entire approval.

But, whether from Mrs. Cox's open hunt, or from some secret reason, Bee's manner to Laflin was cool and distant, while she was more than charming to Cedric Hamilton, on whose left she was seated — Lyddy, the bride, having the seat of honour on his right.

And it made Laflin nervous. Bee looked simply stunning in white chiffon and no jewels, and, to Lyddy's fury, younger than we had ever seen her. I think it was a *coup de théâtre* of Bee's to come out in a gown emphasizing her own youthfulness, on the day that Lyddy would have given a fortune for Bee's lack of years.

Bee's hair was done low in her neck and tied

with a big white bow, such as young girls wear, and while it was as mean a thing as only a woman can think up, nobody could blame her for this final stab at the redoubtable sister-in-law, who had helped to make her life uncomfortable for years and years.

Nor was the final triumph of displaying the devotion of the handsomest young millionaire in town lacking to complete her triumph, and the more indifferent Bee became, as Jermyn whispered to me, "the more Laflin humped himself."

Finally Jimmie fired the bomb he had been considering, as I could see, for weeks.

"What sort of a machine are you getting, Bob?" he asked.

"Think we'll get an Isotta," answered Bob, carelessly. "We want to hit her up, rather. So I propose to get a machine warranted to pass anything on the road."

Jimmie's cigar began to breathe and blink.

"Don't believe you'll be able to do that," he said.

"Why not?" demanded Bob.

"Because I am going to take an American machine over, and I'll bet that you never can catch us."

I gasped, but Jimmie heard me. He turned and grinned in my direction.

"Think you and Aubrey could join us for the summer?" he said.

I gave an ecstatic bounce in my chair, then looked at Bee. But the widow's eyes were discreetly cast down, so that she was also missing the look of entreaty from Laflin.

"I don't like that arrangement at all," said the bride, excitedly. "I want to get away from people we know, and I don't propose to go chasing at breakneck speed after the Jimmies' automobile, or to have them always chasing us. So let that end the matter before it begins!"

Everybody looked anxiously at Bob, but his glance never wavered.

"I may buy just a racer with only room for myself and the chauffeur for my own sport," he said quietly. "But I rather think it will be an Isotta. However, I shall leave the final decision to Mrs. Mygatt. What shall it be, Lydia?"

Lyddy's fan snapped. She glared at us, like an animal at bay. Then she spoke, albeit with a dry mouth.

"I will be satisfied with anything you decide, Bob, only—I would like to go with you!"

"Thank you," said Bob. Then turning to Jimmie, he said, "An Isotta touring car!"

"How jolly it would be," said Jermyn, leaning forward, "if we could all meet over there somewhere this summer!"

"Why, are *you* thinking of going?" asked Hope, so eagerly that she clasped her hands on the table in front of her.

"I had thought of it," said Jermyn. "The Willings have ordered a new *Mercédès*, and Cynthia rather wants me to join them at Aix for a month's tour of France."

Hope nearly chanted the *Te Deum* in her joy, for it had been a quarrel with Cynthia Willing which had precipitated Mrs. Cox into the arena.

Jermyn took this way of letting Hope know of his change of heart.

For reply, Hope only held out her hand and Jermyn wrung it without a word.

Bee looked up and smiled. Mrs. Cox saw this and evidently was capable of putting two and two together, for she murmured her apologies for leaving early, and made as if to rise.

At that moment Hope rose from the table and ordered coffee served in the drawing-room. Jimmie and I were the last to leave the dining-room, except Bee, whom Laflin openly detained by taking her hand in his, regardless of the English butler.

The ceiling to Hope's dining-room is a

dome and has a curious echo, which accounts for my halting Jimmie at the door with a gasp of astonishment, for these words sounded from the side wall in front of us:

“Take me, Bee! I’ve done everything you wanted me to. I’ve given up everything I knew you couldn’t stand, and I’ve at last come to the conclusion that I can’t live without you!”

Jimmie forgot to smoke in his excitement. Of course we ought to have gone on or stopped our ears or done something honourable. But we didn’t. We stood still and — listened.

“Well,” said Bee, with a little laugh, “when I come to the same conclusion, after similar deliberation and caution, I will let you know. At present it is my intention to join the Jimmies for a summer of motoring abroad!”

Jimmie kicked at my skirts and we went through the doorway in an ecstasy of silent laughter.

“In that case,” said Laflin in a troubled voice, which held a new note of manliness in it, “I shall buy a motor and follow you, even if it is to the ends of the earth.”

Bee cleared her throat as she always does when she is pleased.

Jimmie wrenched my little finger and stammered:

“For good work — work with a fine, domestic finish — work which will bear the closest inspection and compare favourably with that of any other artist in her line — give me, — oh, give me, I say, the work of the widdy Lathrop!”

THE END.

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